WORLD CUP PREVIEW

Athlon Sports

A COMPLETE GUIDE TO:

- ⇒ SCHEDULES
- ⇒ GROUPS
- ⇒ COVERAGE
- ⇒ HISTORY
- ⇒ PREDICTIONS

PREVIEWS OF ALL 48 TEAMS

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MEN'S JOURNAL

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Athlon Sports

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LETTER FROM THE EDITOR

Whether you're a devoted *football* fan who has been counting the days for this World Cup since the last one ended in 2022 . . . or you're a casual *soccer* fan excited that the Cup is back in North America for the first time since 1994 . . . or you're just jumping on the bandwagon now—welcome! This *2026 World Cup Preview* (Athlon Sports' first for the world's biggest sporting event) has something for all of you, expert to novice alike.

This World Cup includes 48 teams, the most in the history of the event (the first was back in 1930), and includes expected favorites such as Spain, France, Brazil, and England, along with first-timers such as Uzbekistan, Jordan, and Cape Verde, plus fellow rookie Curaçao, at 156,000 citizens the smallest country ever to qualify! Countries from every continent will play at 16 stadiums in the United States, Canada, and Mexico from June 11 to July 19.

To get you ready to watch soccer every day for a month, we've pulled together expert writers familiar to American fans, such as Michael Lewis, Scott French, and Kevin Baxter, along with a great team of international experts from every continent (well, yes, except for Antarctica; can't play soccer on ice). They've delivered inside stories on how the Cup was awarded to the unique three-country host; what fans have enjoyed watching in past World Cups; how the United States team came together under a new coach, er, manager; and which international superstars are most likely to have a big impact on this World Cup.

On a less positive note, the impact of the war in Iran remains uncertain. At press time, we were unsure whether Iran would be coming to North America for its three group-stage games, two in Los Angeles and one in Seattle. In this issue, we have proceeded expecting those games to be played while hoping that the war ends soon. Of course, events may change, so watch Athlon Sports' soccer coverage for more updates.

The other 101 games will definitely go on. We have created preview pages for each of the 48 teams in this largest-ever World Cup. They are arranged roughly by their early-2026 seeding on the world stage, from favorite Spain to happy-to-be-here Haiti. On each team preview page, you'll find expert analysis of each team's key players, along with insights on coaching style, and a look at a projected starting lineup. There is also some great trivia that will help you impress your friends, including each team's World Cup debut year, national team nickname, and how to say soccer in that nation's native language.

For those not fully versed in world club football, we've included the countries where a player's club team plays (while assuming you know where famous places like Madrid or Rome are located!) and we've used Premier League instead of England. We're also using the recognizable real names of the 16 stadiums.

Here's hoping the world can take a timeout from a tough period to enjoy some togetherness, some great sport, and unity around the world's greatest game.

JAMES BUCKLEY JR., MANAGING EDITOR

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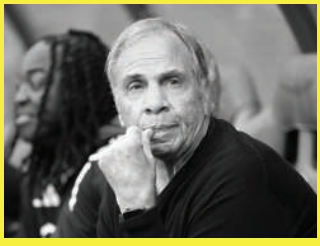

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THANKS TO THIS INTERNATIONAL GROUP OF SOCCER WRITERS:
Juan Arango, Jon Arnold, Philippe Auclair, Kevin Baxter, Michael Church, Scott French, James Grossi, Craig King, Domagoj Kostanjsak, Micky Jnr., Tom Middler, Neil Moxley, David Nickel, Andy West, Paul Williams, Mark Zeigler

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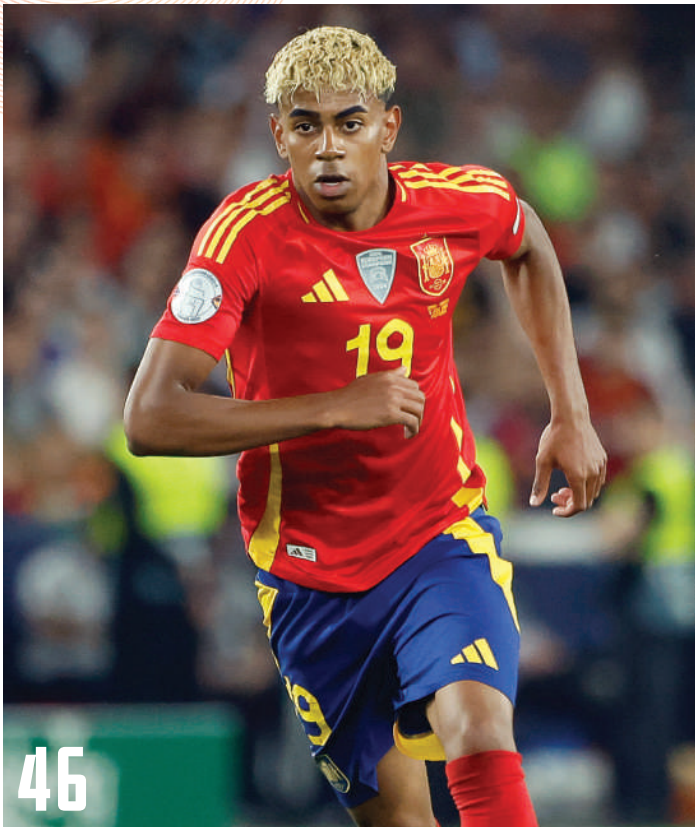

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STARTING XI

HERE ARE THE NUTS AND BOLTS, THE INSIDE SCOOPS, AND ALL THE BASICS YOU NEED TO GET READY FOR THE WORLD'S BIGGEST MONTH-LONG SPORTING EVENT

I THE BASICS

The 2026 World Cup kicks off when South Africa faces Mexico in Mexico City on June 11. This will be the 23rd edition of the World Cup. The event is organized and run by FIFA: the Fedération Internationale de Football Association. (Say it, "FEE-fah.") That opening match will be the first of 104 games played by 48 teams until the championship game on July 19 at the home of the New York Giants/New York Jets in New Jersey. The number of teams and games is the most ever, up from 32 and 64 in the 2022 event. The 48 teams are split into 12 groups (see pages 12-13). After three group-stage games, the top two teams in each group, along with eight third-place teams, advance into a 32-team "knockout" stage. All will become clear, trust us.

II WORLD CUP RECORDS

- MOST CHAMPIONSHIPS: **Brazil, 5**
- MOST GOALS, CAREER: **Miroslav Klose, Germany, 16**
- MOST GOALS, SINGLE CUP: **Just Fontaine, France, 13 (1958)**
- BIGGEST WIN BY GOALS: **9, three times**
- MOST TOTAL GOALS, ONE GAME: **12 (Switzerland 7, Austria 5 in 1954)**

FRANCK FIFE/AFP VIA GETTY IMAGES

III

THE SITES

For the first time, the World Cup will be held across three countries: the USA, Canada, and Mexico. These 16 cities will play host to the matches. Why not list the stadium names? Well, for the World Cup, they're all different than what we normally call them. FIFA doesn't allow corporate naming on its venues (unless they get paid, of course).

IIIA

THE MASCOTS

It's a big sporting event, so we gotta have the mascots. Sigh. Meet the three country-themed costumed characters for this World Cup. One good guess which animal goes with each host nation.

SAM CORUM/PA IMAGES VIA GETTY IMAGES

IV

CAN I GET TICKETS?

Got a lot of money? Then, sure, you can get tickets! However, if you don't want to pay the enormous sums asked by official FIFA sales outlets—or the even larger sums on secondary markets, one of which is controlled by FIFA—then, no. About six million seats are/were available for the 104 games. Every round of ticket sales that FIFA offered sold out (there were more than 150 million requests). If you got tix, congrats and enjoy! If not, we'll see you on the couch like the couple of billion people who will watch on TV.

STARTING XI

V

WHO'S COMING?

FIFA includes 211 members, including national soccer organizations as well as some territories that have earned membership status. They are broken up into six continental groups called confederations. For the past two years-plus, these confederations have held their own playoffs to determine which teams earn a spot in the World Cup. The three host nations, all from CONCACAF*, qualified automatically. Here is how many teams each of the six sent:

*Confederation of North and Central America and Caribbean Association Football

VI

WHAT'S THE U.S. WEARING?

Here's a look at one of the new US men's national team jerseys, which make their debut in 2026.

VII

EVENTS BEYOND THE GAMES

Can't get inside the matches? There's more than one way to dive into the World Cup excitement. In most host cities, there will be public places to watch the games on big screens and take part in Fan Zones. Buy the latest gear, share your love of a team with fellow supporters, or just enjoy a great day out in the sun. Plans are evolving, so check local info as the dates approach. Some cities were scaling back plans because the teams they ended up with might not be big draws.

VIII

THE BALL

Made by adidas, the official match ball is called the Trionda ("three waves" in Spanish). The colors connect the three host nations. The pattern of shapes and the seams, as well as the materials, were somehow designed to work in the climate of the three countries, too. And because everything except this magazine apparently has to have it, AI powers a chip in each ball to track all sorts of information.

FROM TOP: NIKE; JULIAN LESHAY GUADALUPE/NORTHJERSEY.COM; FRANCESCO SCACCIANOCE - UEFA/UEFA VIA GETTY IMAGES

IX

TRIVIA TIME

- The current World Cup trophy is the second version. The first was the Jules Rimet Cup, which Brazil claimed in 1970 for winning it three times. The current trophy debuted in 1974.
- World Cups were not played in 1942 and 1946 due to World War II. (An Italian soccer official safely hid the Jules Rimet trophy during World War II. Whew.)
- This is the second time the Cup has been played in the US (1994), and the third in Mexico (1970 and 1986). It's a first for Canada.
- Egypt was supposed to play at the first World Cup in 1930, but the team missed the boat to Uruguay.
- Only eight nations have ever won the World Cup; see our team previews to find out which ones!
- FIFA says that 1.5 billion people watched the 2022 World Cup final, won by Argentina over France on penalty kicks.
- Yes, soccer is low-scoring. There have been more 1-0 scores in the World Cup than any other final total.

X

TALKING SOCCER

For the soccer fans among you, apologies. But the World Cup is often the way that many fans jump into the world you already happily inhabit. This is to help them understand some of the key terms they'll hear and read during the Cup. For TV viewers, two they'll quickly learn are . . .

OFFSIDE
A violation called when, as a ball is passed forward, an offensive player in his own half does not have two players between him and the goal. This can be a millimeter-level decision, which is why FIFA now uses . . .

VAR
Video assistant referee, the system of multiple cameras that an off-field official can look at to help the on-field referee make sure all calls are correct (and/or not missed)

OTHER SOCCER/ FOOTBALL TERMS TO KNOW:

CAPS
International appearances by a player for a national team

FREE KICK
Awarded after a foul

OWN GOAL
A goal scored (by accident, one assumes) by a player against his own team

PITCH
The field

TOUCHLINES
British English for the sidelines

CORNER KICK
Awarded to the offense when the the ball touches a defensive player and goes over the end line.

GOAL KICK
Awarded to the defense when the offense kicks the ball over the end line

PENALTY KICK
A free shot, one-on-one vs. a goalie, taken from 12 yards out; awarded when a serious foul or handball is called inside a team's penalty area (the 18-yard box at each end in front of the goalie).

BONUS!

YOUR PICK!

Fill in the team you think will win, as well as the award winners. Or save this to fill in afterward for a souvenir of the amazing summer.

2026 World Cup Champion _____

Golden Boot (MVP) _____

Golden Ball (top scorer) _____

Golden Glove (top goalie) _____

Top Young Player _____

THE DYNAMIC DOZEN

THE GROUPS OF WORLD CUP 2026

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SOUTH KOREA [102]

CZECHIA [120]

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CANADA [90]

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GROUP F

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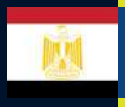
At 48 teams, this will be the largest World Cup ever contested. During a star-studded World Cup Draw on December 5, 2025, North American sports stars Wayne Gretzky, Shaquille O'Neal, Aaron Judge, and Tom Brady made the random picks that resulted in these 12 groups. The top two teams in each advance after Group Stage games to the knockout Round of 32, along with the eight third-place teams with the most points (see page 42 for our complete predictions). Numbers in brackets show where you'll find each of the team previews in the pages ahead.

GROUP G

BELGIUM [67]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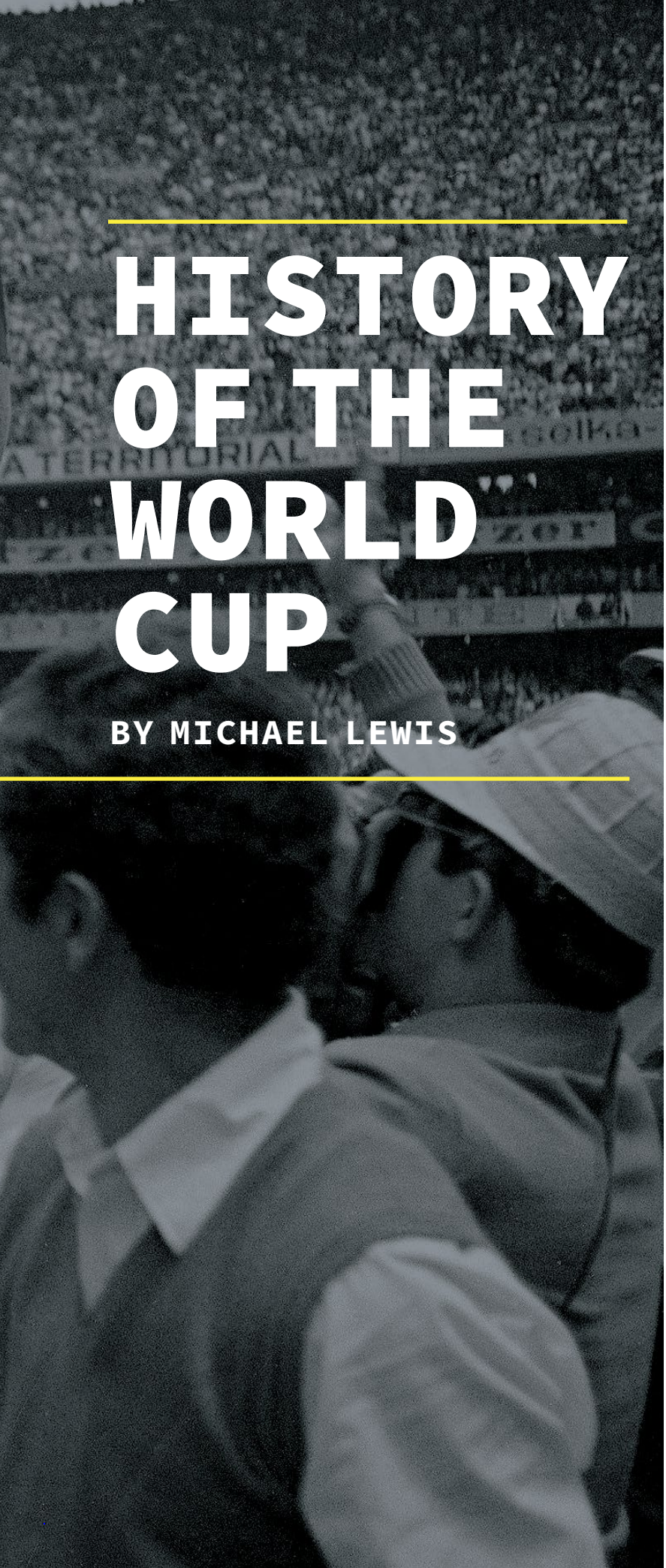
THE BEST SO FAR



HISTORY OF THE WORLD CUP

BY MICHAEL LEWIS

ALESSANDRO SABATTINI/GETTY IMAGES

Let's just say there is no other sporting event like it in the world.

Not even close.

Since its inception in 1930, the World Cup has produced some of the most dramatic and memorable moments in global sports, whether it is the likes of Pelé (at left), Diego Maradona, Kylian Mbappé, and Lionel Messi performing unheard-of heroics or talented teams entertaining billions.

Since that 1930 kickoff, 86 national teams have qualified, originally striving for the Jules Rimet Cup. After Brazil retired it by becoming the first team to win the coveted trophy three times, in 1970, a new object of desire, the FIFA World Cup trophy, replaced it. One team will carry it home from New Jersey this summer.

Only eight countries have won the World Cup: Brazil (five times), Italy (four), Germany (four), Argentina (three), Uruguay (two), France (two), England (one), and Spain (one). Five have reached the final but have not won it—the Netherlands, Hungary, Czechoslovakia, Sweden, and Croatia.

Success can be relative. It can be a team not fancied by many that earns a place in history.

Croatia has punched above its weight, finishing third in France in 1998, second in Russia in 2018 (though that team was feted with a parade in the capital, Zagreb), and third in Qatar in 2022.

Biggest upset? The United States team's stunning 1-0 victory over England, thanks to Joe Gaetjens' goal, at the 1950 World Cup in Brazil tops many observers' lists. The Americans also recorded a 2-1 win over Colombia, one of the 1994 competition's favorites, on home soil. An own goal and a score by Earnie Stewart proved to be the difference. Sadly, perhaps to show the intense nature of the Cup for some fans, Colombia defender Andrés Escobar, who scored the own goal, was assassinated after returning home.

North Korea's surprising 1-0 group-stage result over Italy in 1966 was a shocker. In the 1990 opener, Cameroon gave notice that it would be a team to be reckoned with, behind a 1-0 triumph over reigning champion Argentina.

But while we tip our cap to the upsets and out-of-nowhere results, the history of the World Cup can also be traced and defined by its superstars. We'll track back to the beginning, but before we do, let's meet two names who became legends (of different sorts) on the World Cup stage.

THE REIGN OF PELÉ

IN 1958, A 17-YEAR-OLD PUT on a dazzling display for the ages. Edson Arantes do Nascimento, better known to the planet as Pelé, scored the game's lone goal in his second appearance, a 1-0 quarter-final victory over Wales. He added a stunning 23-minute, second-half hat-trick in a 5-2 romp over France and a brace in another 5-2 triumph over host Sweden in the final. His teammate Vavá also scored in the championship encounter for the Brazilians, who became the first team to win the Cup playing out of its home hemisphere. French striker Just Fontaine led everyone with 13 goals, a record that still stands.

In Chile four years later, Pelé set up Brazil's first goal and scored the second in a 2-0 win over Mexico before suffering a groin injury in the next group-stage match against Czechoslovakia. His supporting cast was up to the task. His replacement, Amarildo, found the net three times during the tournament. Vavá, who became the first player to score in two finals, and Garrincha, each finished with four total tallies as Brazil recorded a 3-1 victory in the final, a rematch with Czechoslovakia.

Considered by many the greatest World Cup team, the brilliant 1970 Brazilians rolled through the competition with a perfect 6-0 mark, outscoring their foes 19-7. England goalkeeper Gordon Banks brought them back down to earth, producing one of the greatest World Cup saves on a Pelé shot in a 1-0 Brazil win in group play. Pele scored "only" four goals in the tournament, but he had help from Jairzinho (team-best seven). Both players found the net in a 4-1 rout of Italy in the final as captain Carlos Alberto put an exclamation point with a thunderous late strike. No one has since matched Pelé's three World Cup wins, and until Lionel Messi came along, the Brazilian was the unchallenged GOAT of soccer.

MARADONA

ANOTHER KIND OF HERO

BONGARTS/GETTY IMAGES

ARGENTINA'S DIEGO MARA-dona also made headlines in three competitions, though not always positive ones.

Powering Argentina to its second World Cup triumph in 1986, Maradona dominated the tournament like no other player has, taking part in 10 of his team's 14 goals. That included assisting the game-winner by Jorge Burruchaga in the 3-2 final win over West Germany in Mexico City. But there were two other Maradona goals that will be remembered forever. In a 2-1 quarterfinal victory over England, Maradona batted the ball past goalkeeper Peter Shilton with his fist. He claimed the goal was scored by the "Hand of God." It was not called back. In the second half, Maradona went on a mesmerizing run through the midfield and defense to produce one of the greatest goals he or anyone else has ever scored.

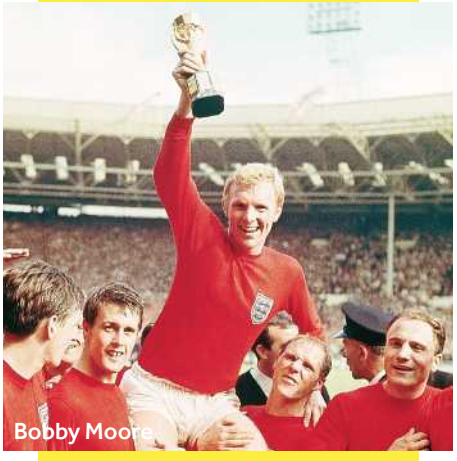
In Italy in 1990, at a tournament defined by cynical play and the lack of goal-scoring, Maradona and Argentina came close again, but fell to West Germany in the final, 1-0, in Rome on an 85th-minute penalty kick by Andreas Brehme. Franz Beckenbauer, the West German head coach, joined Brazil's Mário Zagallo as the only individuals to have won World Cups as a player and coach (France's Didier Deschamps—1998 as a player, 2018 as a coach—later joined that exclusive club).

Maradona suffered through the 1990 tournament, fouled 14 times alone by Cameroon in a 1-0 loss to open group play, setting the tone for a forgettable competition. After Argentina lost in the final, Maradona incredibly claimed the Mafia had influenced the tournament.

In his third World Cup in 1994 in the US, a disgraced Maradona was thrown out after two matches for failing a drug test.

THE CUP COMES HOME

ENGLAND WAS REALLY THE home of world soccer, the birthplace of the game that had taken over the world. So it was a special day on July 30, 1966, when England won its lone World Cup, and did so on home soil. The final had everything—lead changes, late heroics, and a controversial goal. England emerged with a 4-2 extra-time victory, although the West Germans weren't entirely convinced of that, especially after what transpired in extra time. Helmut Haller gave the Germans a 1-0 lead in the 13th minute, but Geoff Hurst countered six minutes later for England. The score remained tied until Martin Peters lifted the English to a 2-1 edge in the 78th minute. As time was running out, Wolfgang Weber scored on a free kick for a 2-2 deadlock. Eleven minutes into the first extra session, Hurst fired a shot that bounded off the crossbar and into the goal. Or did it? Linesman Tofiq Bahramov (Soviet Union) said it was good, much to the chagrin of the Germans. Hurst added an insurance tally in the final minute to become the first player to record a World Cup final hat trick. (Carli Lloyd of the U.S. duplicated the feat in a 5-2 victory over Japan in the 2015 Women's World Cup championship match).



Bobby Moore

Johan Cryuff

HOME CONTINENT COOKING

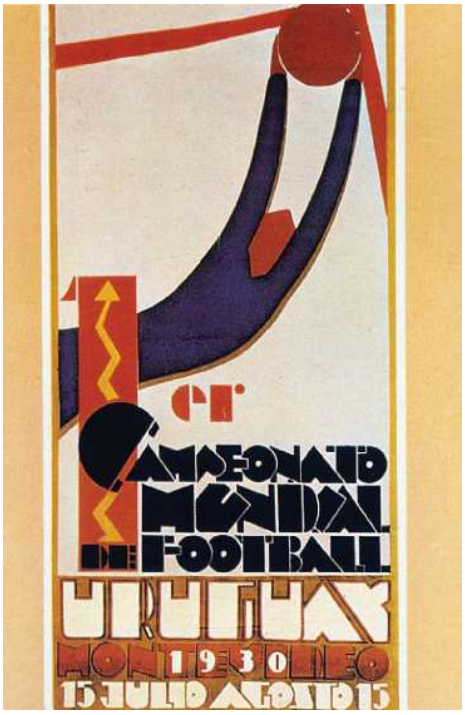
THE "TRADITION" OF THE WINNER HAILING FROM THE HOST CONTINENT continued in the 1970s.

The Netherlands is considered the best team never to win a World Cup, finishing as bridesmaids in 1974 and 1978 to West Germany and Argentina, respectively. Behind genius manager Rinus Michels and the incomparable Johan Cruyff, the Dutch invented Total Football, but could not solve the team from the Cup's host nation. In '74, they ran into captain Franz Beckenbauer and West Germany, which posted a 2-1 victory in Munich. After Johan Neeskens converted a second-minute penalty kick, the Germans rebounded. Defender Paul Breitner converted a penalty and Gerd Müller, aka "Der Bomber," scored his 14th career World Cup goal (then the record) just before halftime as the hosts held on for the one-goal victory. In '78, the Dutch came close again, losing out to a talented Argentine side playing at home in Buenos Aires. That Argentine side boasted captain Daniel Passarella, Osvaldo Ardiles, and Mario Kempes. In the final, Kempes gave his country a 1-0 lead late in the opening half, but substitute Dick Nanninga equalized with eight minutes to spare in regulation. Kempes struck with in the first extra-time period. Ricardo Bertoni added an insurance goal for a 3-1 victory.

With the 1982 Cup in Spain, it was Europe's turn again. Italywas led by Paolo Rossi, who transformed from pariah to hero, wiping away the stigma of a betting scandal that had banned him for two years. After Italy played three consecutive group-stage draws, Rossi took center stage, striking six successive goals. That included a hat trick in an epic 3-2 quarterfinal triumph over Brazil and a brace in a 2-1 semifinal victory over Poland. Rossi scored the first goal in the final against West Germany. Marco Tardelli and Alessandro Altobelli added second-half goals. West Germany's Paul Breitner tallied late to avoid the shutout—3-1, Italy.

FROM TOP: STF/AFP VIA GETTY IMAGES; JAMES BAYLIS - AMA/GETTY IMAGES

HUMBLE BEGINNINGS



THE IDEA OF A GLOBAL, STANDALONE SOCCER TOURNAMENT WAS born from the successful Olympic Games in 1924 (Paris) and 1928 (Amsterdam), when Uruguay took the audacious step of venturing across the Atlantic to dominate and win two gold medals.

In marked contrast to 2026's 48-team tournament, the first World Cup was an invitational in Montevideo, Uruguay, as the country was celebrating its centennial. Only 13 teams competed, including just four from Europe (Belgium, France, Romania, and Yugoslavia). South America dominated with seven nations—Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Paraguay, Peru, and Uruguay. Mexico and the United States represented North America.

Lucien Laurent had the honor of scoring the first Cup goal in France's 4-1 result over Mexico, while the US's Bert Patenaude registered the initial hat trick in a 3-0 win past Paraguay. The American side had opened its World Cup with a 3-0 victory over Belgium, and earned a semifinal showdown with Argentina. The US was vanquished by the Argentines, 6-1. Uruguay made home-field advantage stand up by claiming the other spot in the final.

Down 2-1 at halftime, Uruguay rallied with three unanswered goals for a 4-2 triumph. The mood of the competing nations' capitals showed varying reactions. There was dancing in the Montevideo streets as a national holiday was declared. In Buenos Aires, angry Argentines vented their anger by throwing bricks and stones at the Uruguayan embassy.

Home field paid off again in 1934 as Italy won, beating Czechoslovakia, 2-1, in the final, with Angelo Schiavio collecting the winner five minutes into extra time. Italy repeated as champs in 1938, although it wasn't a truly "World" Cup. Brazil and Cuba were the only Western Hemisphere countries that participated in the event, held in France.

The World Cups of 1942 and 1946 were cancelled due to World War II. A ravaged soccer world could not come together again until the 1950 Cup in Brazil, won in an upset by inaugural champion Uruguay.

When Uruguay ruled the soccer world: From top: The official poster for the 1930 World Cup, held in Uruguay; a souvenir poster commemorating Uruguay winning the gold medal at the 1924 and 1928 Olympics; and the Uruguay national team at the 1930 World Cup final.

FROM TOP: POPPERFOTO VIA GETTY IMAGES/GETTY IMAGES; BOB THOMAS/POPPERFOTO/GETTY IMAGES; HULTON PICTURE LIBRARY/ALLSPORT

USA AND FRANCE

IN THE NEWS

THE UNITED STATES HOSTED ITS FIRST World Cup in 1994. The risk of playing in a non-soccer-mad nation paid off, as record crowds packed just about every game. The home-continent streak was broken but not the home hemisphere one, as Brazil reigned supreme, winning its first World Cup in a generation, since the magical 1970 run. The dynamic duo of Romário and Bebeto fueled the Brazilian attack, while captain Dunga and goalkeeper Cláudio Taffarel made sure the defense was tight. After an entertaining Cup, a dull championship game (a scoreless 120 minutes) was decided by penalty kicks. The Seleção Canarinho won 3-2. The tournament didn't end with a bang, but a whimper, as Italian star Roberto Baggio booted his penalty over the crossbar on the final kick.

In 1998, for the first time in 20 years, a new country joined the exclusive winners' club as France claimed its first World Cup. Playing at home, Les Bleus demonstrated how players from diverse backgrounds (such as Algeria, Guadeloupe, and Armenia) can not only work together but thrive. Criticized by their media before and during the tournament, the French piled on victories, reaching the final against favored Brazil. Ronaldo, the South American side's star player, suffered a seizure in his hotel room before the confrontation. He played, but the striker wasn't himself. France took advantage. Zinedine Zidane scored via a pair of first-half headers and Emmanuel Petit added a goal en route to a stunning 3-0 triumph at Stade de France, sparking the biggest celebration in France since the end of the World War II.

In 2002, the French learned the hard way how difficult it is to defend a title as it dropped a 1-0 decision to Senegal in the opener before bowing out in the group stage in the first World Cup co-hosted by two countries (South Korea and Japan). In fact, Korea just about stole the show, reaching the semifinals before falling to Germany. Turkey, another outsider, lost to Brazil in the other semi. Four years after disappointing in France, Brazil won its *Penta* (Portuguese for five), becoming the first country to win that many World Cups. Ronaldo performed a self-resurrection of epic proportions, connecting for a brace in a 2-0 victory over Germany in Yokohama, Japan.

Four years later in Germany in 2006, another familiar name, Italy, danced with the World Cup trophy in Berlin. In the final, the Italians outlasted France after a 1-1 draw by winning a 5-3 penalty-kick shootout (Fabio Grosso had the winning PK). The final also will be remembered for Zidane's ill-advised head butt on Marco Materazzi in the 110th minute. The US was the lone team that did not lose to Italy, via a 1-1 draw in the group stage.

(Above) Brazil celebrates winning the 1994 World Cup in the United States; France hugs it out after winning its first Wold Cup in 1998.

IN RECENT YEARS

PLAYING AN ULTRA-POSSESSION GAME named tika-taka soccer, Spain in 2010 ended decades of heartache and frustration, becoming the eighth nation to raise the trophy in the World Cup held in South Africa, the first on that continent. The Spaniards also became the first team to win it all after dropping their opening game. In a yellow-card-marred final (14 were given) with the Netherlands, Andrés Iniesta spared the world of a scoreless tie preceding a possible shootout, volleying home a Cesc Fàbregas feed in the 116th minute. For the Dutch, the third time in the final hardly was the charm.

In 2014, Germany became the second team to win a World Cup out of its hemisphere by beating Argentina in extra time, 1-0, on Mario Götze's goal, in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. The triumph occurred several days after the Germans humiliated the host side in the semifinals, 7-1, as Miroslav Klose scored his record 16th career World Cup goal.

France was back in the the championship game again in 2018. The 19-year-old Kylian Mbappé served notice how dangerous and dynamic he was. He became the youngest French player to score at the competition and the second teenager, after Pelé, to score in a World Cup final, a 4-2 win over Croatia. Mbappé tied for second place among all scorers with four while winning the World Cup Best Young Player and French Player of the Year awards.

And at the most recent World Cup, in Qatar in 2022, Argentina's megastar Lionel Messi finally won his elusive World Cup in an epic championship match. Argentina and France battled through 90 minutes of regulation and 30 minutes of extra time to a 3-3 deadlock. Messi recorded a brace, including an 108th-minute strike that gave Argentina the lead before Mbappé's penalty-kick goal in the 118th minute forced a shootout. Messi and Mbappé put their penalty kicks away. Argentina's defender Gonzalo Montiel tallied the game-winner, after goalkeeper Emiliano Martinez saved Kingsley Coman's attempt before Aurélien Tchouaméni's went wide for a 4-2 PK win.

With drama like that in the final, the 2026 edition has a goal of its own to shoot for: top that!

Michael Lewis has covered 13 World Cups and seven Olympics, as well as Major League Soccer, in his long writing career. Lewis is the author of several books on the sport as well.

Kylian Mbappé

WORLD CUP HISTORY

YEAR	CHAMPION	RUNNER-UP	SITE
1930	Uruguay	Argentina	Uruguay
1934	Italy	Czechoslovakia	Italy
1938	Italy	Hungary	France
1950	Uruguay	Brazil	Brazil
1954	West Germany	Hungary	Switzerland
1958	Brazil	Sweden	Sweden
1962	Brazil	Czechoslovakia	Chile
1966	England	West Germany	England
1970	Brazil	Italy	Mexico
1974	West Germany	Netherlands	West Germany
1978	Argentina	Netherlands	Argentina
1982	Italy	West Germany	Spain
1986	Argentina	West Germany	Mexico
1990	West Germany	Argentina	Italy
1994	Brazil	Italy	United States
1998	France	Brazil	France
2002	Brazil	Germany	South Korea/Japan
2006	Italy	France	Germany
2010	Spain	Netherlands	South Africa
2014	Germany	Argentina	Brazil
2018	France	Croatia	Russia
2022	Argentina	France	Qatar

HOW WE GOT HERE

THE INSIDE STORY OF THE BID TO HOST THE BIGGEST WORLD CUP EVER

BY KEVIN BAXTER

With nine pavilions and a convention hall, Moscow's sprawling Expocentre is among the world's largest conference centers. It rises from the Krasnopresnenskaya Embankment on the north side of the Moscow River, in the shadow of the futuristic skyscrapers that make up the city's modern business district. It was inside the complex's thick concrete walls, on a sunny summer day eight years ago, that the direction of US soccer changed forever.

Hours before the 2018 World Cup would kick off in Russia, FIFA president Gianni Infantino presided over the organization's 68th Congress, where the main order of business was picking a host for the 2026 tournament. The ballot held just two choices: Morocco, bidding for the World Cup for the fifth time; and a joint bid from the United States, Mexico, and Canada, which marked the first time three countries offered to share host duties.

It seemed like a no-brainer. The 2026 tournament, with 48 teams, would be the most complex sporting event in history. Although the North American bid was unique in both size and scope, the resources, infrastructure, and logistical know-how in the three countries, which had combined to host six men's and women's World Cups in the past, dwarfed that of Morocco, which had no existing stadiums that met tournament specifications.

But as representatives of the 206 FIFA federations (the national groups that organize soccer in their respective countries) that had a vote filed into the hall that morning, the outcome was still in doubt.

"Even the night before, we never believed we had this locked up," said Carlos Cordeiro, then the newly-minted president of the US Soccer Federation and a co-chair of the United Bid committee.

The Americans had been here before. In 2010, the US was confident it had done enough to win the right to host the 2022 World Cup, only to lose to Qatar in a process marred by allegations of bribery and fraud. For Sunil Gulati, the US Soccer president who had put so much into that bid, it was a crushing setback.

A NEW KIND OF SOCCER TEAM

"Right after Qatar was selected, a lot of things go through your head," Gulati said years later. "One is I never want to go through this process again. And two is, let's start [over] right now."

It took him a while to get to number two. But by 2015, due to corruption inside FIFA, president Sepp Blatter was forced to resign and Infantino, his successor, changed the way it approved World Cup bids, going to a transparent public ballot in which every country would vote electronically. Convinced the process would be fair this time, Gulati and US Soccer prepared to bid again. But so did Mexico and Canada. Worried the three countries would divide votes that would cost North America the tournament, back-channel talks began about sharing the event.

Alan Rothenberg, the man behind the 1994 World Cup, the first to be played in the US, said recently of Gulati's diplomacy that "he realized Canada and Mexico were going to be bidding. And even though he didn't think either of them really could do the full tournament, he was worried about everybody fighting with each other. So he convinced Canada and Mexico to join him."

On April 10, 2017, the United Bid was officially announced at the New York's One World Observatory, on the 102nd floor of the tallest building on the continent. The lack of subtlety was the point. The United Bid had announced its presence with authority and the document that supported it would run to more than 70,000 pages.

Yet in many ways, it was far from a done deal.

FIFA PRESIDENT GIANNI INFANTINO

KAI PFAFFENBACH-REUTERS VIA IMAGN IMAGES

LET THE NEGOTIATIONS BEGIN!

Ten months after United Bid's auspicious start, the whole plan suffered what appeared to be a fatal blow . . . yet it may ultimately have been the thing that saved the effort from ruin.

In the wake of the US national team's failure to qualify for the 2018 World Cup, coach Bruce Arena and his staff resigned. Seven weeks later Gulati also fell on his sword, announcing that he would not seek a fourth term as US Soccer president. That cleared the way for Cordeiro, Gulati's vice-president, to win the presidency at the organization's general meeting in February 2018.

Cordeiro, a Harvard graduate and former Goldman-Sachs investment banker, had worked with Gulati on the ill-fated 2010 effort. He was well-suited to head a World Cup bid. Born in Bombay (now Mumbai) to a Colombian mother and Luso-Indian father, he moved to Miami Beach, one of the most most diverse cities in America, when he was 15. Years later, he took over US Soccer at a delicate time, with the vote to award the 2026 tournament just four months away. In his first international trip as president, he traveled to the UEFA Congress in Slovakia.

The visit was intended to shore up the United Bid with some of the 55 European federation presidents in attendance. But after just a few conversations, Cordeiro began to realize the bid may not have the support he assumed it did. The alarms got even louder on the second day of the trip when ESPN published a story that said high-ranking FIFA executives believed Morocco was polling ahead of the United Bid and would win the 2026 World Cup.

Morocco, which needed just 104 votes to do that, had the backing of much of Asia and South America, as well as its home continent of Africa, the unnamed FIFA executives told ESPN. As a Muslim-majority nation, Morocco figured to sweep the Middle East, too. And France, Cordeiro learned, was not only voting for Morocco, a former French protectorate, it was bringing several other former colonial powers—Italy, Belgium, the Netherlands—with it.

"These guys were super, super organized," a former U.S. official said of Morocco. "This was Morocco's fifth bid but this was their most serious attempt. They had lots of friends everywhere."

The United Bid? Not so much.

And time was running out.

So the bid committee reorganized. Less than 24 hours after Cordeiro had landed in Slovakia, the federation presidents of the three United Bid countries—Cordeiro, Canada's Steven Reed, and Decio de Maria of Mexico—were elevated to co-chairs.

The change was necessary, both strategically and practically. Strategically because the old approach was seen in much of the world as a US-led effort, so it was decided power should be shared equally among the three federations. The United Bid, for the first time, truly looked united. It was necessary practically because the committee believed the best way to make up its possible votes deficit to Morocco was to meet in person with representatives of each of the 207 FIFA federations that would be voting in Moscow, from Albania and Andorra to Zambia and Zimbabwe. With just 100 days left that would be impossible for one person. But with three separate delegations—each with representatives from the US, Canada and Mexico—traveling to locations in Europe, Asia, Oceania, and South America—the sprint to the end, while still challenging, was suddenly manageable.

FORMER US SOCCER PRESIDENT CARLOS CORDEIRO

"We learned from our errors that we had to be more inclusive. We couldn't possibly do it ourselves anyway," a former USSF official said this winter. "Had we gone it alone, Morocco might have won because they had the world's sympathy."

So the United Bid committee set up shop at Fraser Suites, an extended-stay apartment hotel in London. A staff of about a dozen would schedule meetings with various federation representatives and each night the three co-chairs and their traveling parties would call in to find out where they were going next. On Friday, everyone would return to London to do laundry and share notes before heading out again on Sunday night.

LIFE ON THE ROAD

The plan was audacious and the logistics frequently daunting. Cordeiro, 69, now a senior advisor to Infantino, the FIFA president, as well as to the White House Task Force on the 2026 World Cup, remembers being in Hong Kong and getting a message that he had to be in Saudi Arabia the next day. A direct flight would take 11 hours but he was routed through Dubai, making the trip a tortuously long one.

Another time a United Bid delegation arrived in an unnamed Eastern European country only to find they needed visas to leave the airport. So they made their presentation to that country's federation on an airport concourse. Despite the challenges, the United Bid couldn't afford to leave any stone, no matter how small, unturned. Under FIFA rules, the vote of each member federation counts equally, giving Gabon and Grenada as much power as Germany.

Nor could the United Bid delegations afford to appear ungracious visitors when their hosts offered to proudly show them a small aspect of their country, whether it was dinner, lunch, or a tour of their federation's training center (visits that provided US Soccer representatives with insights that informed the construction of their own national training center years later).

"I spent close to 20 years in Asia when I was a banker and so I had traveled to all of these countries in my prior life," Cordeiro said. "I was familiar with the culture. For me it was a little bit like, not going home, but it was not completely exotic."

After dinner during the Asian confederation meeting in Kuala Lampur, one federation invited the United Bid delegation to spend some time together and eventually try a few karaoke songs. In Saudi Arabia, the delegation was invited to the King's Cup final between Al-Ittihad and Al-Faisaly. In Latvia, there was a traditional dinner in a heated winter garden in the city square.

The pitch was simple. The stadiums and other infrastructure such as airports, public transportation, and hotels, already existed in the United Bid countries and were all up to FIFA specifications. Morocco would have to invest billions in construction to host the tournament. But arguably the biggest selling point was revenue. A World Cup in North America, the three co-chairs emphasized, could generate as much as $14 billion, money that would be used to fund soccer programs in every FIFA member state. (The United Bid's math, done nine years ago, has proven surprisingly accurate, with FIFA's projecting last fall that the four-year World Cup cycle will bring in between $11and $13 billion.)

Still, the pitch didn't always work, sometimes due to being late in explaining the United Bid in detail.

EMILEE CHINN/GETTY IMAGES)

HOST FEDERATION LEADERS IN 2018: STEVEN REED (CANADA), CARLOS CORDEIRO (USA), AND DECIO DE MARIA GIANNI (MEXICO)

Morocco had a head start in building relationships and sharing its vision.

Neil Buethe, US Soccer's former chief communications officer, traveled with the delegation led by Cordeiro on every trip during the four months. Buethe remembers a cordial visit with the Turkish federation in late May, just weeks before the vote.

"They were great hosts, unbelievable," he said. "But they said to us, 'Hey you guys have a great bid. It's probably the best bid. But we already told Morocco we're voting for them.'"

And they did.

Buethe said the United Bid had a similar experience in Oman.

"They hosted us incredibly well—traditional dinner, real hospitality, the kind of visit that makes you feel like you've really connected with them," he said. "Then after the vote, I ran into the federation representative on the floor of the convention center. He came over, shook my hand, and he was almost apologetic. I had assumed they voted for us but in that moment I realized they hadn't.

"We understood there were a lot of reasons why a federation might go the other way. You're not going to get every vote. What mattered was the relationships you developed along the journey. Even though Oman didn't support us on the ballot, we stayed in touch and built a great connection—and that can be important down the road."

But as the process continued, the dominoes seemed to be falling in favor of the United Bid, though the three co-chairs refused to take anything for granted even as the FIFA delegates filed into the Expocentre on the day of the vote.

"We were somewhat scarred from our prior experience bidding for a World Cup," Cordeiro said. "You couldn't take anything as a given. We had been well received, and members were interested in what we had to say. However, we were never, ever so confident, particularly the night before. Because you just never know."

VICTORY... AND HARD WORK AHEAD

In the end it wasn't close. The voters overwhelmingly backed the United 2026 bid, 134 to 65. A grinning Cordeiro, flanked by Mexico's De Maria and FIFA president Gianna Infantino, posed for photos on an ersatz soccer pitch rolled out on a stage at convention center. Well to his right, almost out of the picture, were CONCACAF president Victor Montagliani, head of the Canadian federation when the United Bid was launched, and Gulati, who would serve on the FIFA Council through 2021.

(Don't feel bad for Morocco. Although it failed to land the World Cup the first five times it bid for the tournament, the sixth try

JOOSEP MARTINSON - FIFA/FIFA VIA GETTY IMAGES)

proved the charm. In 2024, Morocco was chosen as one of six countries—along with Spain, Portugal, Argentina, Paraguay, and Uruguay—from three confederations that will host the 2030 Men's World Cup.)

Both the Canadian and Mexican federations have gone through four presidents since 2018; in the US, Cordeiro has been replaced by Cindy Parlow Cone, a former World Cup champion and the federation's first female head. If the three United Bid co-chairs had done the heavy lifting necessary to land the World Cup, the tasks of organizing and running the largest tournament in history fell to the new leaders.

Together with FIFA, they sorted through 41 potential host cities before winnowing the number to 23, then 16 final host cities, organizing them by geography rather than country. While working closely with the host countries, FIFA is running all aspects of the tournament, which will be the first to include 48 teams. With 78 games to be played in the US and 26 in Mexico and Canada, the 104 total matches are the most ever.

FIFA, which has always played men's World Cup games on grass, has worked with the eight tournament venues that usually have artificial surfaces to come up with a way to install temporary—and expensive—grass carpets that could stand up to as many as nine games in less than a month.

Another problem was the weather. The World Cup in Qatar had been played in air-conditioned stadiums; that wasn't an option in North America, despite forecasts predicting the same kind of withering heat and humidity that plagued last summer's US-based Club World Cup. So FIFA has mandated three-minute hydration breaks midway through each half. (That will also give broadcasters an additional six minutes of commercial breaks while effectively dividing each match into four quarters rather than two halves.)

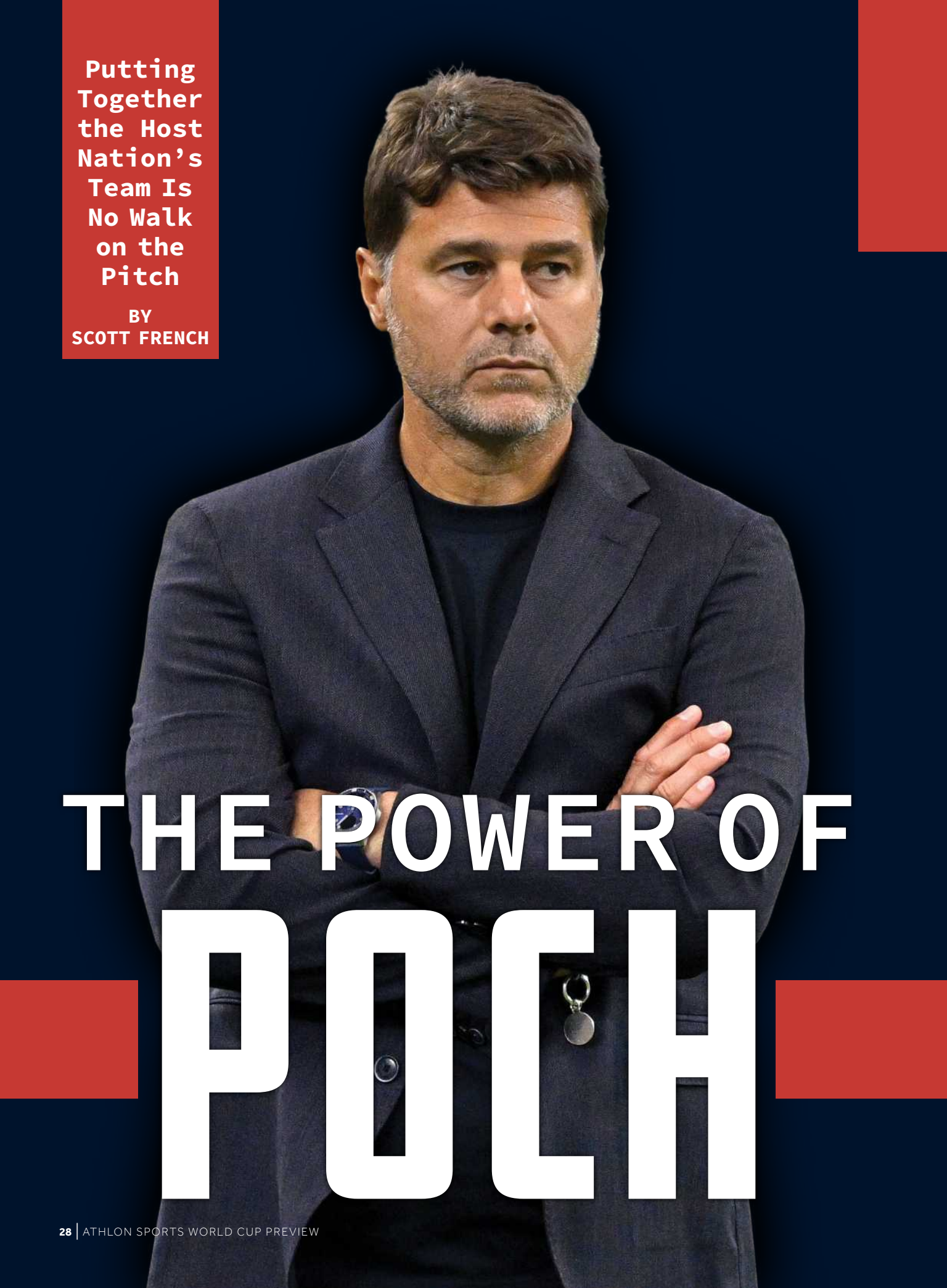
MetLife Stadium in East Rutherford, NJ, was chosen to host the final, with FIFA bypassing larger, more modern stadiums in Los Angeles and suburban Dallas, in part because a mid-afternoon kickoff in New Jersey equates to 9 p.m. in central Europe. But that wasn't the only reason. Civic and political leaders on both sides of the Hudson River spent seven years selling metro New York as the world's most important media, business and entertainment center. It had a diverse population, existing infrastructure and a rich soccer heritage, dating to Pelé's days with the New York Cosmos of the NASL.

Also, it's New York. Well, New Jersey really.

Whatever you call it, though, it will be the center of the sporting universe this July, all because a group of a dozen soccer visionaries from three countries were able to convince the rest of the planet they could put on the best World Cup in history.

Kevin Baxter writes about soccer, hockey, and the Olympics for the Los Angeles Times, for whom he will be covering the World Cup in great detail.

TARIQ ZEHAWI/NORTHJERSEY.COM



Putting Together the Host Nation's Team Is No Walk on the Pitch

BY SCOTT FRENCH

THE POWER OF POCH

It's March 2025, barely six months into Mauricio Pochettino's tenure as United States national team manager. He faces his first real test in the post—with the World Cup not-so-far-down the road—and it's all going wrong in the worst way. Home-soil losses to Panama and Canada three days apart. Listless, heartless, charmless displays, a shaky step beyond the previous summer's Copa América debacle, that has everyone, it seems, wondering just how bad it's going to be come June 12, 2026, when the US faces Paraguay in the host nation's first World Cup game.

A year later, the impossible suddenly seems, well, not so impossible. Maybe. We'll see, but the Yanks' quick transformation under Pochettino—from the stale, entitled underachievers in last spring's Nations League fiasco to the brilliantly imaginative crew that dissected a most worthy Uruguay side in November—has them approaching FIFA's grand spectacle with real belief and the means to make it mean something.

This is the deepest and most talented group the US has ever gathered. The squad includes more than a few significant figures at big European clubs; a couple of them (AC Milan's Christian Pulisic, Juventus' Weston McKennie) are difference-makers—with World Cup experience all over the pitch and, maybe best of all, an understanding of the greater mission and through that a brotherhood created during the tumultuous journey that has brought them from then to now.

Pochettino, who formerly led top European clubs Chelsea, Paris-Saint Germain, and Tottenham, stepped aboard following the devastating failure to advance from the 2024 Copa América group stage. He needed half a year to get a feel for the landscape, then got to work for real, establishing a culture and identity that hearkens back to the roots of all this—longtime fans will fondly remember Paul Caligiuri's "Shot Heard 'Round the World" that sent the US to the World Cup in 1990, its first in 40 years, and what followed—and provides a tantalizing path forward.

How far that will take the Yanks comes down to form and fortune over a few short weeks in June and perhaps July. But recall the chatter the last time the US staged the World Cup, back in 1994, that the day was not far off when the Americans would be challenging for, eventually winning the biggest prize on the planet.

Has that day arrived?

Pochettino, their biggest-name manager since Bora Milutinovic guided a pioneering 1994 group into the knockout stage, had that conversation with the president at the World Cup draw in Washington DC. "He asked me," Pochettino reported, "'What do you think, coach? Can you win the World Cup?'" The Argentine's response: "Of course.

"Because it's the USA," he explained. "The American dream is there. It is about being first. Being the number [one]. . . . We really believe we can win. We are in a place where, after a year and a half [of toil], people are starting to feel that we can win."

They looked like world-beaters through a hugely prosperous autumn of 2025—five wins in six impressive performances against Cup qualifiers, the finale that 5-1 stunner in Tampa over Uruguay. It was all made possible through six months of renovation and reinvention—a pivotal piece was a savvy tactical shift to soothe some longstanding issues—that emerged from the soul-search following the Nations League failure.

"From then," Pochettino noted, months later, "we start to work in a very intense way."

It was a formidable undertaking. He'd inherited something of a mess.

The Americans had descended into turmoil following a round-of-16 run with the World Cup's second-youngest roster four years ago, a good deal of it ugly family stuff involving the families of then-head coach Gregg Berhalter and his 2002 teammate Claudio Reyna.

OPPOSITE: JEROME MIRON-IMAGN IMAGES; LEFT: VINCENT CARCHIETTA-IMAGN IMAGES

The kerfuffle was prompted by Berhalter's "off-the-record" discussion of star midfielder Gio Reyna's problematic conduct in Qatar going public. Berhalter was sidelined eight months as US Soccer investigated, returned after the US exited the Gold Cup in the semifinals, guided the Yanks to a third successive CONCACAF Nations League title, then watched his team fold in dispiriting 2024 Copa América losses to Panama and Uruguay. He was gone for good only 10 days later.

Pochettino was hired two months later, relied on the existing player pool in a couple of October friendlies and the Nations League quarterfinal home-and-home with Jamaica in November, looked into depth during the January camp in 2025, then assembled something akin to a first-choice group for the semifinal with Panama and the expected final against archrival Mexico.

In the brutal 1-0 Panama loss, the lesson was harsh. His team, almost to a man, had no fight, few ideas, and not a whole lot of impetus, and the reaction was swift and brutal, from the legends, the media, the fan base. And, from the inside. Pochettino, who called the defeats "painful," and said he felt "shame," told his players "you cannot win with your shirt," that they must "suffer and win the duels and work hard" or "it's not going to be enough."

Midfield general Tyler Adams said everyone needed to "buy into exactly what we're doing and what we're trying to do," and Pulisic acknowledged. "We're not at our best now. ... Some things need to change. I don't have all the answers at the moment."

Neither did Pochettino, but he warned against giving it more weight than warranted. He told fans not to "be pessimistic," that "in football, anything can happen."

"Now is time to be calm," he said. "Here is not to blame, is not to find some guilty . . . there's still a lot of time until the World Cup."

Well . . . a year, anyway.

First priority, figuring out how this works. Pochettino and most of his staff had worked together at a series of clubs for a decade and a half, but running a national team is very different than working within clubs. "We are," he said, "discovering things that we need to pay attention to in a different way."

"Without belief, you can have talent, you can have very good strategy, but in the end, [you'll fail] if you don't have the belief and the spirit to fight."
— Mauricio Pochettino

Most important was instilling a culture emphasizing collaboration and a fierce winning mentality, the kind of grit that governed US teams in previous generations . . . but more of it. There would be no more free rides, and when young talent performed well, it was rewarded. There were certainly opportunities, usually through injury—more than a dozen vital players were out for some stretches, some quite lengthy—and Pochettino, endlessly experimented with personnel, broadened the pool and constructed a foundation over the next six months.

It didn't always show on the field. The Yanks were outclassed by Türkiye and destroyed by Switzerland ahead of the 2025 Gold Cup, where they maneuvered through to the title game and lost, deservedly, to Mexico. These squads were largely a second team—Pulisic had begged out of the tournament, to sharp criticism from, among others, Landon Donovan (page 142); the Club World Cup occupied a few others; and there are always injuries—but several players had breakthrough performances. Most notable was probably New York City FC goalkeeper Matt Freese, the new No. 1, whose three stops fueled a penalty-kicks triumph over Costa Rica in the tournament quarterfinal.

Crystal Palace center back Chris Richards also nailed down a first-choice role, taking a huge stride toward earning US Soccer's player-of-the-year honor, and another five—fullbacks Alex Freeman and Max Arfsten, midfielders Malik Tillman, Sebastian Berhalter, and Diego

NATHAN RAY SEEBECK-IMAGN IMAGES

MATT FREESE

MATT KROHN-IMAGN IMAGES

Luna—cemented regular roles. The soccer wasn't brilliant, but things were starting to fall into place.

"I think we understand what the standard is now," US captain and center back Tim Ream said afterward. "We understand what we need to do on and off the field. We understand what kind of culture is wanted from us. It took a little bit longer than it probably should have."

But next time out, not so good. South Korea toyed with the US in a 2-0 decision in an early September friendly, but a tactical tweak heading into the second half—a shift from Pochettino's preferred 4-2-3-1 to a three-center-back alignment—offered a path forward. The Yanks started with three at the back, two wingbacks, a midfield box, and a striker, and looked like a different team. The next two slates of games, and especially 2025's last against Uruguay, provided confirmation.

The formation, more of a shape-shifting hybrid than centered around a true three-man backline, led to greater attacking lucidity, width, and movement, and defensive organization. The performance against Uruguay, behind a rotated lineup averaging just 14 caps, was revelatory. Ream called the move "a stroke of genius." Pochettino saw an American identity within.

"I cannot lie," he said after the draw, "the last few games, the team showed a very good [brand of soccer]. . . . I think we start to show that we are USA, that [this] is the culture here, about winning, about fight and never give up, and I think that is why we start to be a little bit more happy and focused [on evolving] in different areas: technical, tactical, fitness. I think we start to talk about being more or better than the opponent in different aspects on the pitch. I think when our standards are where we are now, we can evolve very, very quick."

His team believes, and, he says, "belief in soccer is everything.

"Without belief, you can have talent, you can have very good strategy, but in the end, [you'll fail] if you don't have the belief and the spirit to fight. Because that is [an] emotional thing that you need to connect with this energy that puts you in the possibility to express your talent."

The Yanks have talent. Could they do something truly special? History is not on their side—only twice in a dozen World Cups has the US won two games—way back in 1930, the first World Cup, then in that magical 2002 quarterfinal run under Bruce Arena, when they might have gone further had Germany's Torsten Frings been whistled for a handball. That team also beat Mexico in one of the rivalry's famous "dos-a-ceros," to get there, their lone triumph in six all-time World Cup knockout matches.

Reaching the knockout stage was "success" in the US's first few World Cups after qualifying in 1990 for the first time in four decades. The 2002 wins pushed the standard higher, and so everything since has disappointed. The US has been to the last 16 in its last three finals, pushed Belgium and Netherlands to overtime in the the past two. Not good enough. Drawn twice with England in group play, the US finished ahead of them in 2010. Not good enough.

What constitutes success now, Professor Pochettino?

"Win the World Cup."

Scott French has been covering soccer in the US since the 1970s, from the NASL to the entire history of MLS, plus six—soon to be seven—World Cups.

THE STARS COME OUT!

WATCH FOR THESE INTERNATIONAL SOCCER MEGASTARS TO MAKE THEIR MARK ON WORLD CUP 2026.

Soccer is, of course, a team game. No matter how great a player is, he needs the rest of the guys on the field to be able to make his mark. But sports revolve around superstars, and soccer is no exception. These players are among the most famous people in the world, to say nothing of their status as elite athletes. They are recognized wherever they go, prayed for in their home countries, and put under pressure that would crush most of us. But one way or the other, all of these players will have a huge impact on the games ahead. Mark your ballot now for one of them to emerge as the winner of the coveted Golden Ball as World Cup MVP.

—James Buckley Jr.

LIONEL MESSI, ARGENTINA

The consensus pick for the greatest player of all time will play his World Cup swan song this summer. Messi led Argentina to the 2022 title, adding the ultimate trophy to a cabinet jam-packed with hardware. Among the accolades are a record eight Ballon d'Or awards as world player of the year, along with the Golden Ball in 2022. His pinpoint passing, miraculous free kicks, and mind-bending dribbling runs will be a highlight of the Albiceleste's quest for a repeat.

JULIAN FINNEY/GETTY IMAGES; OPPOSITE, FROM TOP LEFT: SEBASTIAN FREJ/GETTY IMAGES; BRADLEY COLLYER/PA IMAGES VIA GETTY IMAGES; STEFANO RELLANDINI / AFP VIA GETTY IMAGES

KYLIAN MBAPPÉ, FRANCE

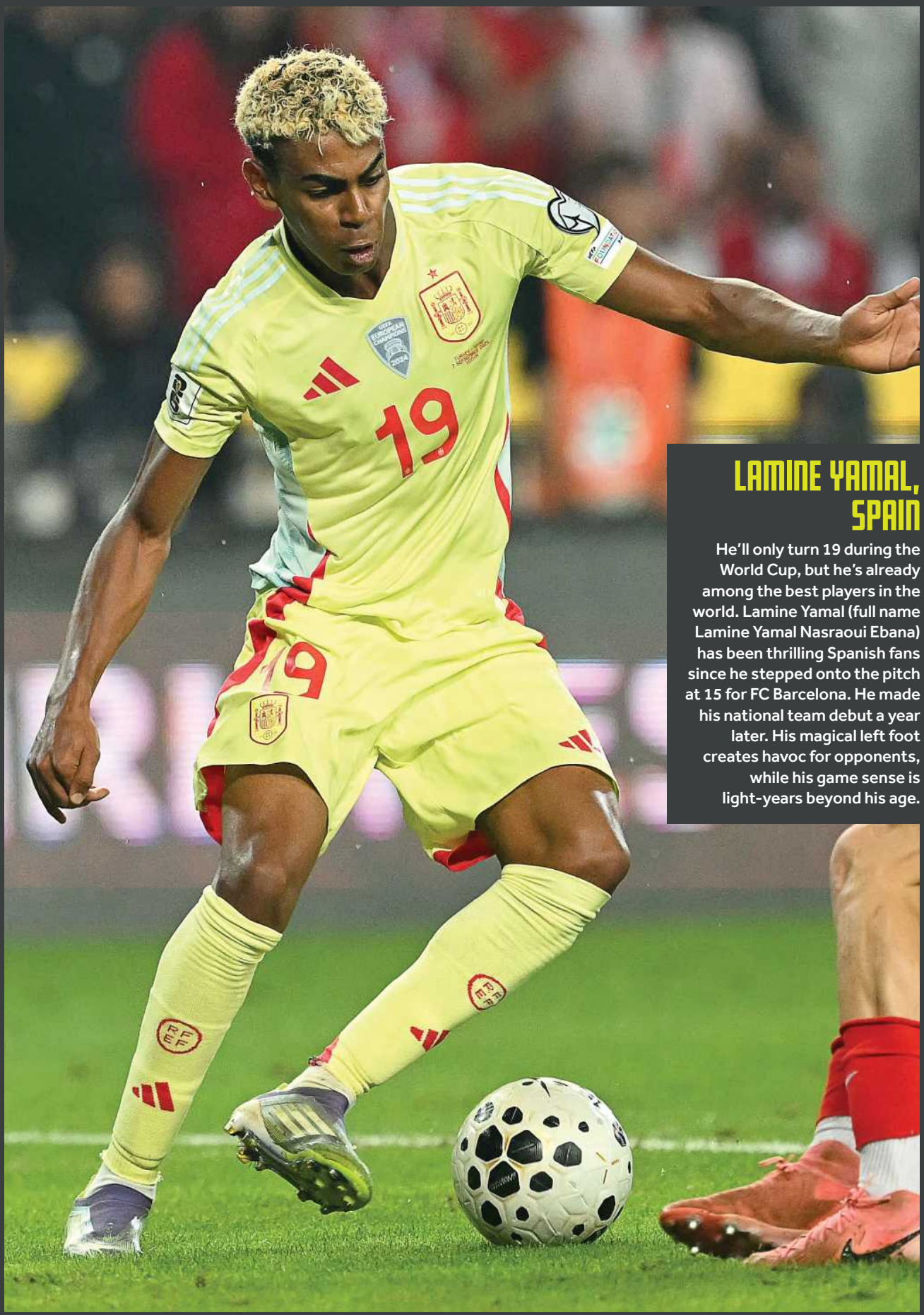
He's only 27, but this is Mbappé's third World Cup. In 2018, the powerful striker matched the great Pelé by scoring in a World Cup final as a teenager. His goal helped France carry home the trophy for the first time. He led them to the final match in 2022 only to fall short to Argentina. It wasn't Mbappé's fault—he had a hat trick in the game! Now the French captain, he will be key to their aim of a third straight final.

ERLING HAALAND, NORWAY

Nothing is more unstoppable on a soccer pitch than this mighty Norwegian freight train. Since bursting onto the world soccer scene in 2019, Haaland has remade the striker's position. His height, power, and speed are unmatched, and he has turned opponents' nets into his personal playground. Haaland has scored 55 goals for his country in only 48 games (through April 1). In late 2025 with Manchester City, he reached 100 career goals in the Premier League faster than any player ever. This will be his first time around on the World Cup stage and he is eager to add to his goals total.

HARRY KANE, ENGLAND

Silky smooth with an unerring knack for being in the right place at the right time, Kane is faced with massive pressure to bring the Cup home to England for the first time since 1966. He certainly has the skills to give it a go as the Three Lions' all-time leading scorer. He has six Premier League seasons with 20 or more goals, and then set a team mark with 36 after moving to Bayern Munich in 2023.



LAMINE YAMAL, SPAIN

He'll only turn 19 during the World Cup, but he's already among the best players in the world. Lamine Yamal (full name Lamine Yamal Nasraoui Ebana) has been thrilling Spanish fans since he stepped onto the pitch at 15 for FC Barcelona. He made his national team debut a year later. His magical left foot creates havoc for opponents, while his game sense is light-years beyond his age.

OZAN KOSE/AFP VIA GETTY IMAGES

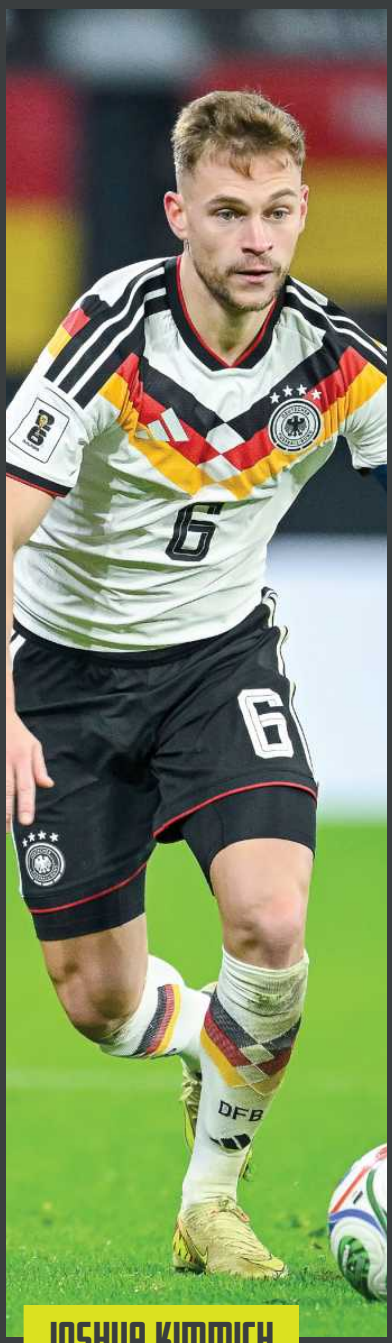
CRISTIANO RONALDO, PORTUGAL

By some measures, Ronaldo is the most famous person in the world. No one, for example, tops his 672 million Instagram followers. Those fans chose wisely. While starring for several top clubs and winning seven national league titles along the way, he became an international sensation for his free kicks, nose for the goal, and eyes-on-me celebrations. With Portugal, he is the world's all-time leader in international goals with 143. Can he wrap up his career with a World Cup title?

VINICIUS JÚNIOR, BRAZIL

"Vini" is both spectacular and exasperating. Real Madrid and the Brazil national team have dealt with both aspects, but in this World Cup, Brazil hopes for more of the former. His speed is a serious weapon, and he's both a noted goal scorer and deft passer. If he can be a leader at only 25 years old (he turns 26 during the Cup), he and Brazil will be in the mix to add to their all-time record five World Cup titles.

FROM TOP: GUALTER FATIA/GETTY IMAGES; NELSON ALMEIDA/AFP VIA GETTY IMAGES

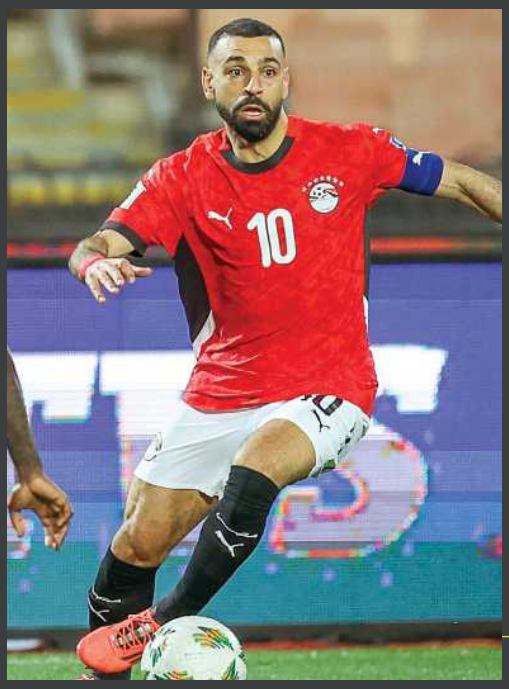


JOSHUA KIMMICH, GERMANY

The German team is a bit of a dark horse in this competition, and if they emerge near the top, Kimmich will probably have a lot to do with it. Not a flashy scorer (though he can find the net), Kimmich's tactical brilliance, positional flexibility, and leadership are his real assets. He'll probably be part of the German midfield at this Cup, but look for him all over the pitch.

LUIS DÍAZ, COLOMBIA

Sometimes you watch a game and immediately can see one player is head and shoulders above the others. This writer saw that at a Colombia-Brazil World Cup qualifier. Within minutes, it was clear that this Flash-like forward outstripped everyone on the field. If Colombia has its eye on advancing far, Díaz will take them with his remarkable skills and speed.



MOHAMED SALAH, EGYPT

Already a legend with Liverpool fans for helping them win two Premier League titles and a Champions League crown, Salah hopes to match that success with his national team. At 34, he's probably playing in his last World Cup, so he'll have extra motivation to use his left-footed magic. Egypt is not a top-20 team, but the draw gives Salah and his teammates a good shot to advance.

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: HARRY LANGER/DEFODI IMAGES/DEFODI VIA GETTY IMAGES; MARCELO ENDELLI/GETTY IMAGES; AYMAN AREF/NURPHOTO VIA GETTY IMAGES

LOCAL HEROES

The three countries hosting the Cup all boast several stars, with these players expected to get most of the headlines.

CHRISTIAN PULISIC, UNITED STATES

"Captain America" has become, by most accounts, the most accomplished US player ever. He has starred in Germany and is now at AC Milan in Italy. He's been part of the US team since he was 17 and helped them reach the Round of 16 at the 2022 World Cup. Sam's Army (the US fan club) will hope he can bring them a lot to cheer for.

ALPHONSO DAVIES, CANADA

Davies has put together perhaps the most distinguished international career of any Canadian player. A seven-time Bundesliga champ with Bayern Munich, he has been wearing the maple leaf since he was 16. This will be his second World Cup and he hopes to carry Canada farther than they have ever gone.

RAÚL JIMÉNEZ, MEXICO

The veteran striker reached 100 caps for his country in 2026 and hopes to add more than three to that total this summer. Now with Fulham in England, he has also played in Mexico, Spain, and Portugal, along with helping his national team win two Gold Cups.

SON HEUNG-MIN, SOUTH KOREA

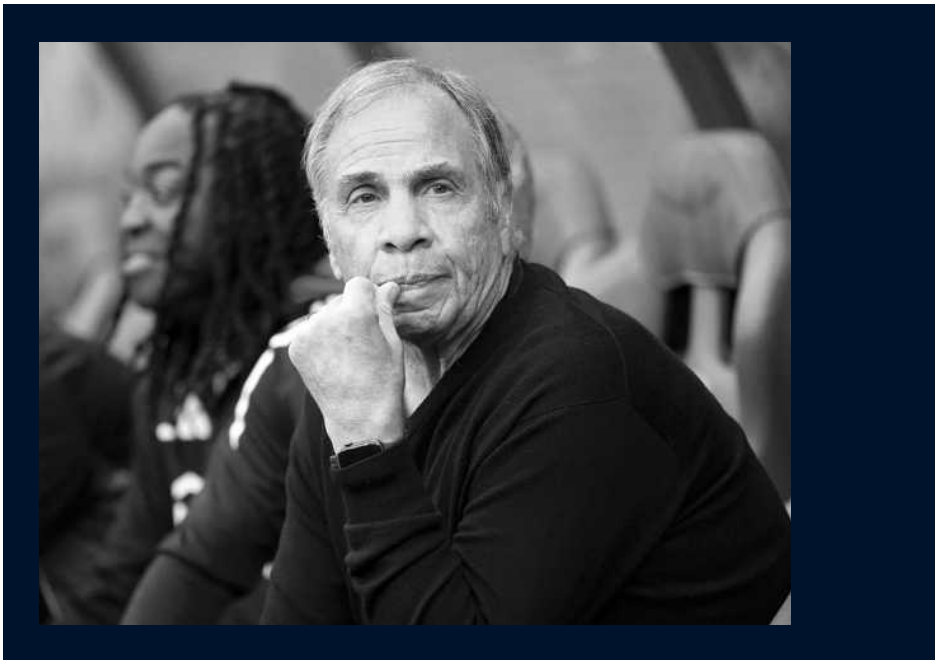
Quality always comes through. After scoring more than 120 goals for Tottenham, Son moved to LAFC in Major League Soccer . . . and scored nine goals in 10 games! He has also played more games for South Korea than any other player and is second all-time in goals for his country. Though 33, he still has the skills to try to create some surprises for a team with Round of 16 hopes.

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: CHUNG SUNG-JUN/GETTY IMAGES; HOWARD SMITH/ISI PHOTOS/USSF/GETTY IMAGES; PATRICK T. FALLON/AFP VIA GETTY IMAGES; JAY BIGGERSTAFF-IMAGN IMAGES

THE EXPERTS SPEAK

A LAP AROUND THE PITCH WITH THOSE IN THE KNOW

BRUCE ARENA



Bruce Arena is the most successful coach in men's US soccer history and the only man to manage the USMNT in multiple World Cups. He's now the San Jose Earthquakes head coach; we asked him for his take on this summer's tournament, the second to be played in the US.

—Kevin Baxter

Athlon Sports: You managed more World Cups than any coach in US history, but you never got to manage one at home. How big a deal is this? Is this team under big pressure?

Arena: It's huge. This particular team has not played any games abroad, so it's great to have home-field advantage. And they're going to need it because they didn't have to qualify, so they haven't been in real tough environments and tough games. Overall, playing at home is just a huge advantage. They're in a favorable bracket, they have everything going for them. I would feel good about it.

You managed in the [2002 World Cup in] South Korea/Japan, the only other World Cup played in multiple nations. How does the size of the US and the summer heat and humidity make this one more challenging?

And time zones, too. Plus, there are a number of indoor facilities. The games are going to be played in the afternoons because of global television, so the heat and humidity is going to be challenging, for sure. It's possible the teams are going to be traveling long distances after they get out of group play, to different time zones, and that affects you as well. And then, are you playing indoors? Are you playing outdoors? All of those factors are going to play a big role in the competition.

That puts a lot of pressure on the manager, right? You're the guy, ultimately, that has to bring people together and get them not to worry about that and just focus on the field and not the travel and time zones.

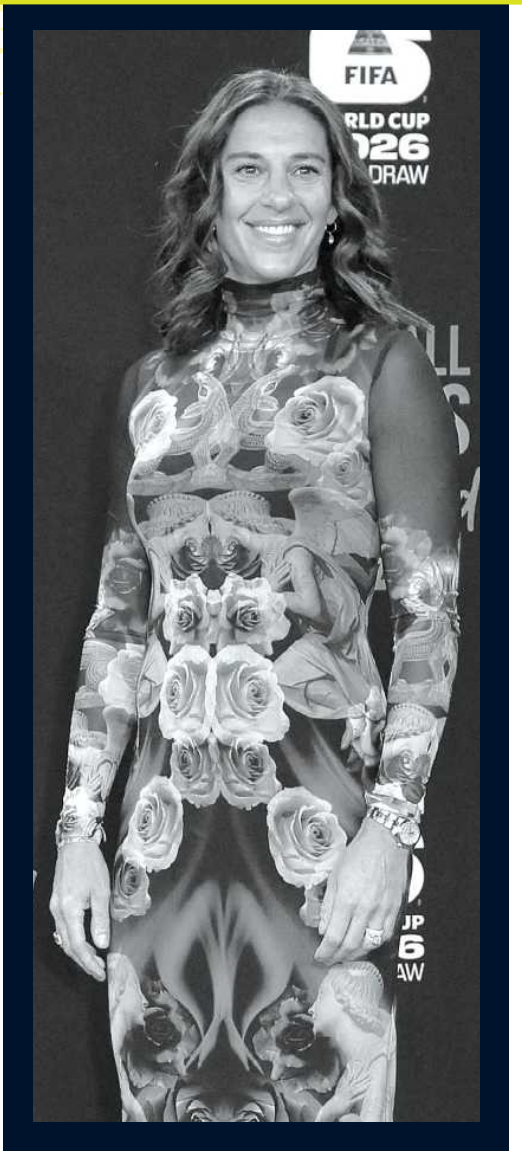
Well, you do have to worry about it. It's challenging. There's also just a challenge [for other teams] initially, just to get to the US and make the adjustment with the time. So some of the athletes are going to be exhausted. It's going to be difficult.

What advice would you have for fans, especially as they're kind of warming into the tournament in the early games?

Because of the expanded field, group play is not going to say a whole lot. It's just going to be like the NCAA basketball tournament. It's going to be more of a survive-and-advance mentality. Even for the elite countries, the round of 32 may be easy. So all the big boys are going to show up in the round of 16. That's where it really gets interesting.

TROY WAYRYNEN-IMAGN IMAGES

CARLI LLOYD



BRIAN SNYDER-REUTERS VIA IMAGN IMAGES

Carli Lloyd knows something about World Cups. A two-time Women's World Cup champion. Lloyd earned Golden Ball (MVP) honors at the 2019 competition, while also becoming the second player to record a hat-trick in a World Cup final. She will return a FOX Sports analyst for this World Cup.

—Michael Lewis

Athlon Sports: What are your expectations for [US star] Christian Pulisic?

Lloyd: Massive. I don't think he's necessarily the leader that everybody has been forcing him to be. It would be best for him and the team if somebody else was captain, and if he could go out and play and produce like he's doing in Milan. He's that quiet leader. If he doesn't try to be anything other than Christian, he's going to have a huge World Cup. The biggest thing is … his form, whether he stays healthy.

How will the U.S. team fare?

The Gold Cup was the turning point, when [coach Mauricio Pochettino] left a lot of well-known players off the roster. It was the best thing that could have happened. It gave a lot of MLS players, non-European players, confidence and belief. Pochettino was able to instill that culture of what he's wanting. It's not a vacation when you come into the men's national team. There should be pride. There should be excitement where you want to come in and you want to lay your body on the line and do everything possible for the team. That last window [November], I'm glad that they found it. They don't have much time together, but I am very optimistic.

What sort of advice do you have for Pochettino?

Players see everything. They can tell the coach's mental state, whether they're nervous, whether they're excited. He has a big task. I got to talk to him at [December's World Cup] draw. He said it does take time to change a culture. It's not selecting the best individual players it's selecting the best collection of players.

Who is your dark horse?

Ecuador. They've got experienced players. They've got some young, emerging talent. They're very organized defensively. They don't concede goals very much. They could definitely surprise some teams.

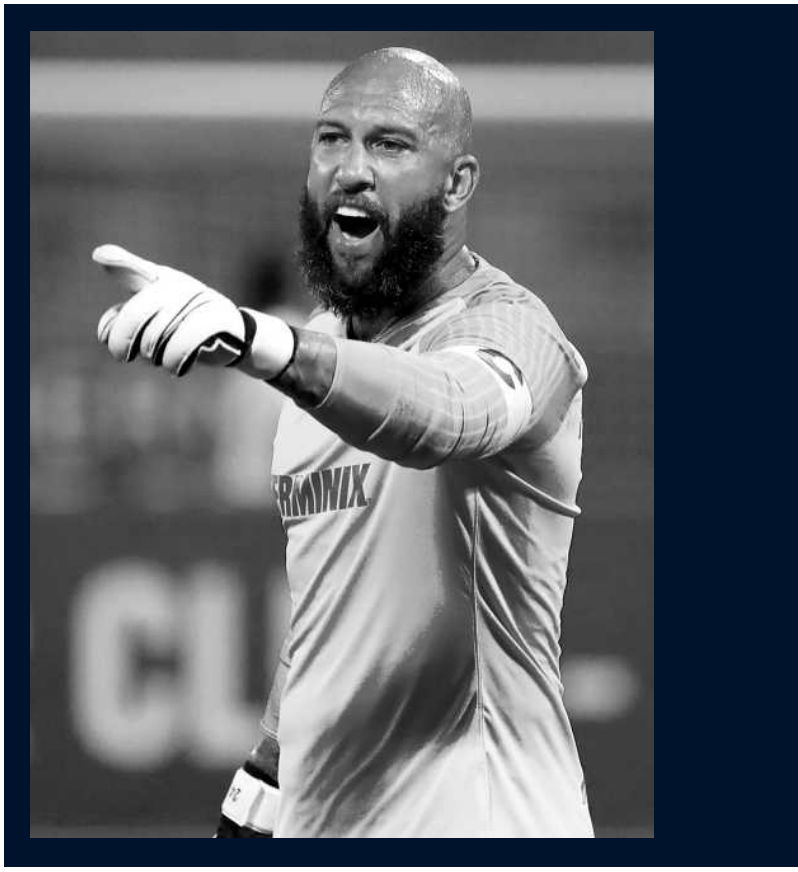
Who do you think will win the World Cup?

France. The last final between Argentina and France was an epic game, with [Kylian] Mbappé rising to that moment. They have unfinished business. Anytime you get to a final and you lose on penalties—I've been there in 2011 vs. Japan—there's extra hunger and motivation. They've got the right pieces, players. They've got a good shot at doing it.

TIM HOWARD

No goalkeeper has played in more World Cup matches for the US men's team than Tim Howard. He was in the nets in eight WC games, backstopping the team in 2010 and 2014. He produced a tournament-record 16 saves in the U.S.'s 2-1 extra-time loss to Belgium in 2014. Howard is an analyst for NBC's Premier League coverage.

—Michael Lewis



JOE RONDONE

Athlon Sports: What constitutes success for the US at this World Cup?

Howard: With the added round because of the extra teams, that creates new benchmarks. So getting out of the group is a prerequisite. That's not success. Success is winning a big match in the Round of 32 or 16. At that point, you're probably looking at a nation that has gotten behind this team and gone through every emotion with them. This current crop of players hasn't quite had that signature win that everyone's looking for.

Besides Christian Pulisic, what American players do you think might move into the spotlight?

Folarin Balogun has the opportunity to break out as a striker. [On defense,] Chris Richards, who is an absolute monster, has done so well for club and country. This could be another big leap forward for him. [Goalkeeper] Matt Freese is going into the World Cup with probably 15 to 17 caps—he's a baby, but he has shown that he can do the business.

In goal for the US team, you, Tony Meola, Kasey Keller, and Brad Friedel spoiled us. Why haven't we seen the same quality in this generation?

Goalkeeping coaching the US has sort of gone downhill. There used to be a host of very good goalkeeper coaches. Based on the evolution of the game and the super-keeper in possession-based tactics, we spend more time in training [working on] that. [I think we have started] to get away from the bread and butter of goalkeeping.

Who are your favorites?

Probably Spain. I like the balance of their team with Rodri and the other senior players, but also with the youth and bravado that they have. Or does Argentina have enough? Being back-to-back winners is very difficult. That would give me pause, the pressure they have to defend. And the French team over the last eight years has been magnificent.

Do you have a dark horse?

The first one that jumps out at me is Portugal. They're brilliantly coached by former coach of mine, Roberto Martinez. If they put it together, they've got a really good shot at making a deep run.

You feel they have the ability to [go deep].

JOHN STRONG

On July 19, when tens of millions of people tune into FOX Sports' coverage of the World Cup final, John Strong will be wrapping up a whirlwind month—his fourth as FOX's "man on the mic" for a World Cup. Strong and his analyst partner Stuart Holden (a 2010 World Cup USMNT player) and field reporter Jenny Taft have a big job ahead of them to reach that game. He talked about how they get ready . . . and what he expects to see.

—James Buckley Jr.

Athlon Sports: How are planning to balance speaking to the devoted fan and to the viewer newly on the soccer bandwagon?

Strong: That's something that Stu Holden and I think about endlessly. It's why the word is *broad*casting. I think the approach that Stu and I always take is to just [understand] that we're talking to that broad tent, and we never want to do anything that excludes a part of the audience that does not devote their life to the sport the way we do. While at the same time, you don't want to be patronizing, you don't want to speak down to anyone.

This will be the first World Cup you've called at home. What part of that are you most looking forward to? How do you think American audiences will respond?

Even if you don't have a match ticket, which are hard to get, or even if you're not in a city where matches are being held, the odds are good that one way or the other, the sport is going to be right nearby. The events away from the stadiums, the places people will watch together. It's going to be very exciting. For me, normally when you do an overseas World Cup, you're in a bit of a bubble and it's hard to know how it's being received back home. Now we're going to be in the middle of the circus, traveling around the US and not 10,000 miles away and just seeing social media clips. So I'm so excited for my own sake and for people who have never had the joy of experiencing the incredibly unique thing that is a World Cup.

Let's talk about the home team: How do you see the US team doing this summer?

[There is] definitely a different mood right now. [Manager] Mauricio Pochettino and his staff started with difficult decisions and very committed plans last spring. In the fall, you started to see momentum build, [including the] incredible result of beating Uruguay. The big unknown, which is completely outside his control, is how are the players when they arrive? Do they arrive in a good rhythm? Are they healthy? They have created more depth, plus have the advantage of playing a home World Cup, which will provide with a different sense of urgency for any of these players. I think they should be [aiming for the quarterfinal] to make a grand impact.

Crystal soccer ball time: Who do you see taking home the Cup?

I think Argentina and Spain are easy as co-favorites, and until I see someone beat Argentina in a real match, they're the champions until they're not. I'm fascinated by France, because no one's talking about them. You know, [all they've done is] play in the last two World Cup finals. The other team that I'm really excited about is Morocco. Overall, the fact that millions and millions of Americans to get to experience it all this summer is incredibly exciting to me.

OHN LAMPARSKI/WIREIMAGE

WORLD CUP 2026 PREDICTIONS

ROUND OF 32

ALGERIA

AUSTRALIA

CANADA

CÔTE D'IVOIRE

CROATIA

CURAÇAO

CZECHIA

ECUADOR

EGYPT

JAPAN

SENEGAL

SOUTH KOREA

SWEDEN

TÜRKIYE

URUGUAY

UNITED STATES

ROUND OF 16

AUSTRIA

BELGIUM

COLOMBIA

GERMANY

MEXICO

NETHERLANDS

SWEDEN

SWITZERLAND

QUARTERFINALS

BRAZIL

ENGLAND

MOROCCO

NORWAY

The largest World Cup ever played creates a math problem of global proportions. Because 32 teams will make it through the group stage—either by finishing first or second or by earning one of the eight third-place spots—there are more permutations for the knockout stages than ever before. FIFA's calculation puts the number at 495! So unlike our March Madness preview, we can't just fill out a bracket. There are just too many possibilities to predict head-to-head.

Instead, we've looked at all 48 teams, their groups and matchups, their current form, etc. And here are the teams we expect to advance through the five knockout stages to the ultimate trophy. Each team is listed with the FINAL stage we think they will reach. So, for example, every team listed in the Round of 16 was necessarily also in the Round of 32, as was every Quarterfinal team, etc.

SEMIFINALS

ARGENTINA

FRANCE

PORTUGAL

SPAIN

FINALS

FRANCE

SPAIN

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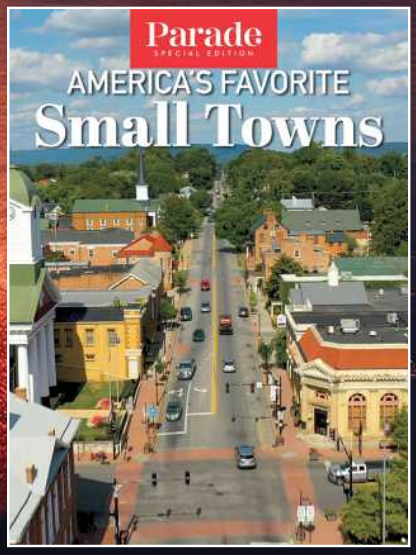

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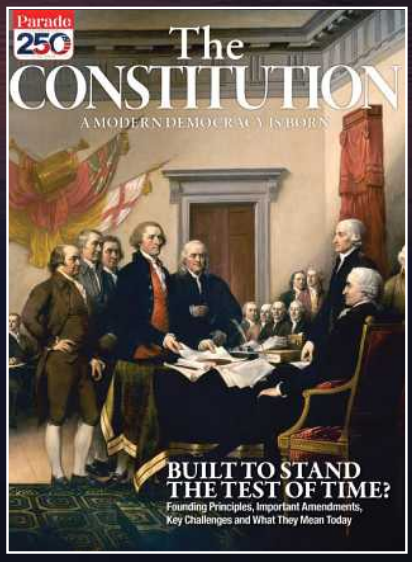
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2026 WORLD CUP
TEAM PREVIEWS

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139 CURAÇAO
140 NEW ZEALAND
141 HAITI

SPAIN

2026 WORLD CUP PREDICTION
RUNNER-UP

CAPITAL: MADRID • POP: 49.2 MILLION • SOCCER = FUTBOL • FIRST WORLD CUP: 1934 • NATIONAL TEAM NICKNAME: LA ROJA

Spain is undoubtedly one of the main contenders at this World Cup, and anything less than a serious challenge in the final would be a disappointment.

The strength of manager Luis de la Fuente's team was evident when it became continental champion two years ago, beating England in the Euro 2024 final. Since then, little has changed. Virtually the same group of players cruised through the World Cup qualifiers, winning five games with one draw and no defeats, scoring 21 goals and conceding just two. A slight setback came with last year's UEFA Nations League final defeat to Portugal, but that was only via the paper-fine margin of a penalty shootout and did nothing to dent La Roja's overall confidence. Most bookmakers rate Spain as the title favorite; would you argue against them?

FORWARDS

Barcelona winger Lamine Yamal has been almost universally regarded as the best young player in the world ever since he first burst onto the scene, aged just 15, in 2023. This summer could be the time for him to upgrade that status: forget merely the best young player, by mid-July we might well be hailing him as the greatest player on the planet, period.

Lamine Yamal's achievements as a teenager have been truly generational: Barcelona's youngest player in more than a century; Spain's youngest ever goalscorer; the youngest player nominated for the Ballon d'Or . . . the list goes on. His ability to elegantly drift inside from the right wing and score spectacular left-footed goals or deliver delicious assists for his teammates regularly draws comparisons with Lionel Messi. This tournament provides the perfect stage for the 18-year-old to prove it to the world.

On the other flank, Nico Williams can be equally exciting. Blessed with the speed to outrun any defender and the ability to shoot or cross with either foot, he is the most likely starter. But his club form has been patchy this season, potentially opening the door to the smooth skills of Ferran Torres or the pacy penetration of Yéremy Pino.

Center forward, however, is Spain's biggest problem position. Álvaro Morata has worn the number-nine shirt for nearly a decade and is also the official team

JEAN CATUFFE/GETTY IMAGES; OPPOSITE: DAVID ALIAGA/NURPHOTO VIA GETTY IMAGES

WORLD CUP APPEARANCES 17 | **WORLD CUP CHAMPIONSHIPS** 1★

LAMINE YAMAL

captain, but the 33-year-old is in clear decline and has lately struggled to impress for his club side, Como (Italy). He may not even make the final squad. Morata's place will likely be taken by versatile Mikel Oyarzabal, who is more of a deep-lying "false nine" than a traditional center forward. Oyarzabal came off the bench to score the winner in the Euro 2024 final and also started all six World Cup qualifiers, so the position is his to lose.

A wild card selection could be Samu Aghehowa, who has only made a handful of international appearances and is still somewhat raw and erratic. But he is a prolific scorer for Porto (Portugal), and would provide a potentially valuable different option.

PEDRI

MIDFIELD

Spanish soccer has long been renowned for producing technically brilliant, era-defining midfielders, and that remains the case. The roster of talent at de la Fuente's disposal is high in quality and endlessly varied.

You want an intelligent reader of the game who offers positional discipline and steady protection to the defensive line? There is nobody better than Rodri, backed up by Martín Zubimendi.

Looking for an all-action marauder who covers every inch of the field? We're talking about you, Mikel Merino . . . not forgetting Fabián Ruiz, Marcos Llorente, Pablo Barrios, and, if healthy, Gavi.

You need a dynamic creator, capable of slicing open opposing defenses with incisive passes or shooting powerfully from long range? Tick that box too, because Spain has options galore, ranging from Álex Baena to Isco, Pablo Fornals to Fermín López.

But the jewel in the crown, and probably Spain's most important player of all, is Pedri. The Barcelona star's range of passing and ability to hold off would-be tacklers is second to none, exhibiting the best qualities of legendary predecessors Xavi and Andrés Iniesta rolled into one.

Pedri is the fulcrum of the team, the orchestrator through whom everything flows. Limiting his influence will be one of the main targets for any opponent, and keeping him constantly involved is a major priority for La Roja.

DEFENSE

Spain is well-stocked with an array of strong, aerially dominant central defenders who are also comfortable on the ball.

Four men shared the playing time during the World Cup qualifiers—Pau Cubarsi, Dean Huijsen, Aymeric Laporte, and Robin Le Normand—and they seem certain selections for the final squad. The two starters? Take your pick.

KEY TO THE CUP

At their best, Lamine Yamal and Pedri are two of the best players in the world, possessing all the potential to lead a deeply talented Spanish squad to World Cup glory. The question is: will they be at their best? If the demands of a grueling club season leave them in a fragile physical state when the summer rolls around, Spain's chances of success would be seriously undermined.

PROJECTED STARTING XI

GK	UNAI SIMÓN
D	PEDRO PORRO
D	ROBIN LE NORMAND
D	AYMERIC LAPORTE
D	MARC CUCURELLA
MF	MIKEL MERINO
MF	RODRI
MF	PEDRI
F	LAMINE YAMAL
F	MIKEL OYARZABAL
F	NICO WILLIAMS

Laporte and Le Normand are the most experienced, and the former's left-footedness works in his favor to provide a natural balance. But Cubarsi (19 years old) and Huijsen (21) are more technically proficient and clearly represent the team's future; de la Fuente has the luxury of deciding whether to make them the present, too.

In the fullback positions, big-haired Marc Cucurella is firmly established as the starter on the left, with Pedro Porro in pole position to join him on the right. But Real Madrid veteran Dani Carvajal is pushing hard for a recall after recovering from injury, and his selection ahead of Porro would add aggression, leadership and experience to a largely youthful squad.

GOALKEEPER

Athletic Bilbao shot-stopper Unai Simón has been first choice between the posts ever since displacing David de Gea in 2021, playing a key role in Spain's Euro 2024 triumph. But the rugged Simón has been well below his best this season, including a high-profile error in the Spanish Super Cup semifinal loss to Barcelona, and he faces stiff competition from two keepers who have enjoyed excellent club campaigns: Arsenal's David Raya and Barcelona's Joan García.

Whoever gets the nod, goalkeeper is a key position for the team's possession-based style. The ability to receive the ball under pressure and pass with accuracy is fundamental, with the goalie required to act as an initial attacking catalyst more than a mere goaltender.

Simón, Raya, and García all excel in these progressive aspects of play, and it's easily arguable that Spain's goalkeeping depth is the strongest out of all teams at the World Cup.

OFF THE BENCH

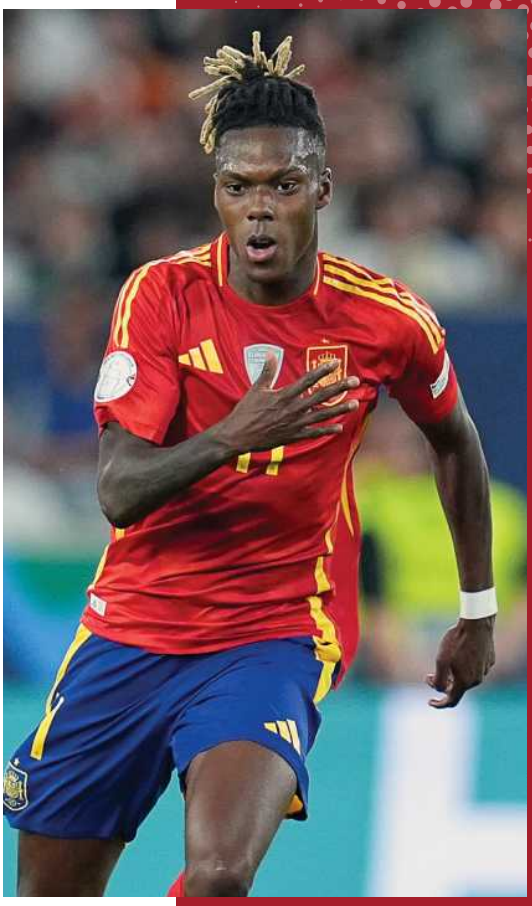
Spain's depth of talent is so great that, aside from Yamal and Pedri, it could essentially field two entirely different starting elevens of a similarly high quality. De la Fuente can therefore easily change games by using his bench, especially in midfield where the likes of Llorente, Barrios, and López can inject a fresh dose of energy during the latter stages.

In attack, Torres, Pino, and Dani Olmo have a key role in alternating with starters Yamal and Williams to keep them fresh, and all are more than capable of providing match-winning moments.

COACH AND STYLE

Possession, possession, possession—Spain's obsession with the ball is rooted in three tactical beliefs: if we have possession, we control the game's tempo; if we have possession, you can't score; if we have possession, you will get tired chasing the ball.

This approach has been employed by every Spanish coach over the last couple of decades, and c de la Fuente is no exception. The 64-year-old tactician has scant experience of club management, instead spending a decade overseeing national youth teams and winning European titles at Under-19 and Under-21 levels. He was elevated to the senior role in 2022, and strengthened his position by winning the Euros two years later.



NICO WILLIAMS

MATCH DAYS

GAME 1
→ Monday, June 15 vs. Cape Verde
→ Mercedes-Benz Stadium, Atlanta
→ 12 pm ET

GAME 2
→ Sunday, June 21 vs. Saudi Arabia
→ Mercedes-Benz Stadium, Atlanta
→ 12 pm ET

GAME 3
→ Friday, June 26 vs. Uruguay
→ Estadio Akron, Guadalajara
→ 8 pm ET

WHAT TO EXPECT

Openers against low-ranked Cape Verde and Saudi Arabia—both played in Atlanta—should give Spain the chance to effectively win its group even before the most challenging game, against tough nut Uruguay. From there on, Spain would alternate between Los Angeles and Arlington (Texas) en route to the final, potentially coming up against Colombia, Croatia, and Germany along the way. None of them will be delighted to face Spain.

MATTEO CIAMBELLI/DEFODI IMAGES/DEFODI VIA GETTY IMAGES

ARGENTINA

2026 WORLD CUP PREDICTION
SEMIFINAL

CAPITAL: BUENOS AIRES • POP: 47.4 MILLION • SOCCER = FUTBOL • FIRST WORLD CUP: 1930 • NATIONAL TEAM NICKNAME: LA ALBICELESTE

GROUP J

Argentina arrives at the upcoming World Cup not merely as a participant, but as a reigning monarch confronting the uncomfortable reality of succession. The Albiceleste stand on a narrow ridge between legacy and renewal, chasing the intoxicating possibility of back-to-back titles while a legendary core edges toward its final bow and a younger generation braces for the unforgiving glare of global expectation. This is not a team drifting into a tournament on nostalgia alone. It is a group wrestling, in real time, with what it means to defend history.

Several veterans dream of riding into the sunset as icons, but elite sport rarely grants fairy tale endings. The cold arithmetic of age, fitness, and timing suggests that for many, this World Cup may force a goodbye they are not emotionally prepared to accept. In international football, sentiment can inspire, but it can also destroy.

For Lionel Scaloni, the challenge is monumental. He has already carved out a place among Argentina's most successful coaches, but sustaining greatness demands more than memory. His ability to recalibrate this squad will determine whether this tournament becomes his crowning achievement or the beginning of an awkward unraveling. In Buenos Aires, whispers are growing louder that Scaloni could step aside at summer's end. If he leaves, he wants to leave from the summit. This climb, however, is steeper than the last.

At the heart of Argentina's narrative is a collision between past triumph and present necessity. Scaloni understands that sustained success depends on ruthless attention to the now. Even the seismic glory of Qatar in 2022 buys no guaranteed starting places. Argentina must resist complacency and avoid the "winner's curse" that has undone so many before them. The last team to repeat was Brazil, way back in 1962.

The pressure extends beyond the pitch. Preparation has unfolded against a backdrop of political tension and institutional drama. The national team finds itself caught between federation president Claudio "Chiqui" Tapia and Argentine president Javier Milei, whose clash over club privatization has spilled into public discourse. Add allegations of financial misconduct around Tapia, and the atmosphere grows heavier. In Argentina, the national team is never just football. It is identity, reflection, and release. Right now, that reflection feels fractured.

Amid the noise, one question towers above all others: how decisive will Lionel Messi be? At 39, Messi no longer defines Argentina's structure. Scaloni has

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LIONEL MESSI

PATRICK MCDERMOTT/GETTY IMAGES

built a system capable of functioning without him. What remains is the Messi moment. Even in a reduced physical state, he can tilt matches with a single action. He is gravity, psychology, inevitability. The real issue is not whether he can play every minute, but whether he can still deliver the three seconds of genius that break a big game open.

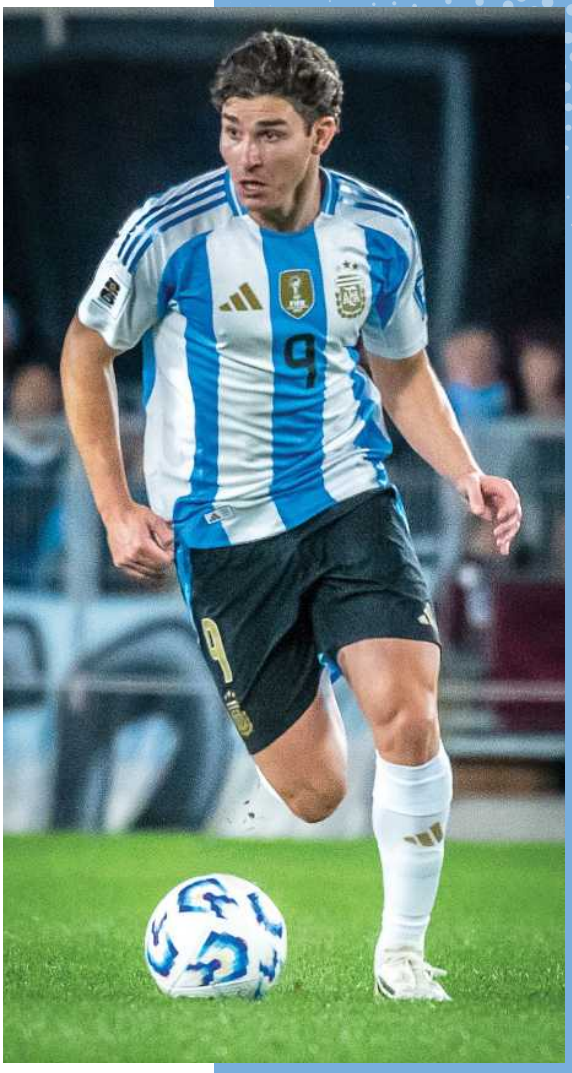
FORWARDS

The Argentine public's deepest anxiety centers on Messi's physical condition. For the first time, he approaches a World Cup while playing his club football in Major League Soccer (for Inter Miami). Despite MLS's rapid growth, concerns persist about intensity, rhythm, and travel demands. The worry is not talent, but edge.

Behind the spectacle of Messi lies the true engine of Argentina's attack: the partnership of Julián Alvarez and Lautaro Martínez. Martínez remains the reference point, but a lingering muscle issue has turned his fitness into a national obsession. Even if he returns for a possible knockout match against Spain, sharpness is uncertain. Should Martínez falter, Alvarez must shoulder the load.

Thiago Almada faces similar struggles, searching for consistency and defensive commitment in a system that punishes luxury. "The Spider" has endured a turbulent spell at Atlético Madrid, where clarity under manager Diego Simeone has been elusive. Meanwhile, Alejandro Garnacho's absence raises eyebrows, hinting at tactical concerns rather than talent deficiencies.

New options are emerging. Giuliano Simeone's intensity fits Scaloni's ethos perfectly, while Franco Mastantuono looms as the great unknown. The River Plate (Argentina) teenager represents calculated risk and renewal, a spark that could energize tired legs if the moment demands courage.



JULIÁN ALVAREZ

FACUNDO MORALES/NURPHOTO VIA GETTY IMAGES

KEY TO THE CUP

We refuse to go with the two-worded answer, you know which one that is. If Argentina turn on that competitive fire and it burns as bright as always, it will be very difficult to see them not win the World Cup. This team has winning so embedded in their mindset, that not seeing them get to at least the semis would be surprising. That mentality is even seen in the younger players, making the future quite promising. It will also be a moment to see a player like Thiago Almada take the baton and lead the national team into the future.

MIDFIELD

Argentina's midfield balances abundance and uncertainty. It remains the deepest sector, yet the most volatile. Rodrigo De Paul embodies this tension. Once the emotional metronome, his move to Miami in MLS has fueled doubts about intensity and focus. Critics question whether his defining traits—harassment, stamina, chaos—have dulled. In a tournament where margins are brutal, any loss of bite becomes magnified. That uncertainty opens the door for Nico Paz, whose

PROJECTED STARTING XI

GK	EMILIANO MARTÍNEZ
D	NAHUEL MOLINA
D	NICOLÁS OTAMENDI
D	CRISTIAN ROMERO
D	NICOLÁS TAGLIAFICO
MF	RODRIGO DE PAUL
MF	ALEXIS MAC ALLISTER
MF	ENZO FERNÁNDEZ
F	LIONEL MESSI
F	JULIÁN ALVAREZ
F	LAUTAURO MARTINEZ

European rise suggests readiness. Facundo Buonanotte and Exequiel Palacios push relentlessly, raising competition levels higher than in 2022.

Questions linger around Leandro Paredes, whose romantic Boca return may leave him exposed to elite tempo, and Giovani Lo Celso, racing injury and time. Yet stability remains. Alexis Mac Allister brings control and intelligence, while Enzo Fernández has evolved into a commanding, two-way presence. Emerging options like Alan Varela, Enzo Barrenechea, and Máximo Perrone add steel and tactical flexibility, crucial insurance for Scaloni's balancing act.

DEFENSE

If attack speaks of legacy and midfield of transition, defense speaks of survival. On paper, it is Argentina's most fragile area. Age and erosion threaten the solidity that underpinned the 2022 triumph.

Germán Pezzella's decline and Nicolás Otamendi's waning recovery speed force hard decisions. Otamendi's leadership remains invaluable, but modern opponents will relentlessly test his legs. Cristian Romero is poised to assume command, potentially alongside more mobile partners such as Leonardo Balerdi, Facundo Medina, or Marcos Senesi.

At fullback, flux reigns. Marcos Acuña's injuries have blunted his influence, while Nicolás Tagliafico offers reliability without dynamism. Valentín Barco, however, excites. His resurgence in Europe has turned him into a tactical wild card, capable of redefining Argentina's left side. On the right, Nahuel Molina stands largely unchallenged, with injuries and form issues thinning alternatives.

GOALKEEPERS

This section requires little debate. Emiliano "Dibu" Martínez remains indispensable. His transformation in the national shirt borders on mythical. He thrives on pressure, weaponizes chaos, and intimidates opponents psychologically. Behind him, options thin dramatically, making his fitness non-negotiable.

OFF THE BENCH

Argentina's bench may decide their fate. Few squads can introduce such varied profiles late in matches. Scaloni's greatest strength lies in answers. Among those are midfielders such as Varela, Barrenechea, and Perrone. Up front, Prestianni's youth could be a spark. Mastantuono was left off a March friendly roster, but could return for the World Cup. Nico Gonzalez did make that March team, so he's another possibility. From energy shifters to tactical disruptors, Argentina can change games after the hour mark. History reinforces this belief. After the shocking result against Saudi Arabia in 2022 (an opening-game defeat), the bench reignited the campaign. This tournament may demand similar interventions.

COACH AND STYLE

Speculation around Scaloni's future cannot erase his brilliance. He is pragmatic, adaptable, and relentlessly player-focused. He builds harmony, shifts systems without drama, and manages egos with rare calm. His in-game adjustments often decide knockout matches, privileging control and cohesion over spectacle. Argentina's success flows from trust, flexibility, and collective responsibility under suffocating pressure.

LAUTARO MARTINEZ

MATCH DAYS

GAME 1
→ Tuesday, June 16 vs. Algeria
→ Arrowhead Stadium, Kansas City
→ 9 pm ET

GAME 2
→ Monday, June 22 vs. Austria
→ AT&T Stadium, Dallas
→ 1 pm ET

GAME 3
→ Saturday, June 27 vs. Jordan
→ AT&T Stadium, Dallas
→ 10 pm ET

WHAT TO EXPECT

Since Copa América, meaningful tests for Messi and Argentina have been scarce. Now, the defending World Cup champions must perform as the hunted. They remain contenders, capable of joining the rare company of repeat winners. A group-stage win is nearly certain, but knockout challenges will arise. Age, hunger, and adaptation will decide everything. If Scaloni can blend wisdom with youth, Argentina's fourth star is not fantasy—it is attainable.

DIANA CARRILLO/EURASIA SPORT IMAGES/GETTY IMAGES

FRANCE

2026 WORLD CUP PREDICTION
CHAMPION

CAPITAL: PARIS • POP: 66.7 MILLION • SOCCER = LE FUTBOL • FIRST WORLD CUP: 1930 • NATIONAL TEAM NICKNAME: LES BLEUS

It's no surprise that the team that in 2022 was a penalty shootout away from retaining the World Cup that it won in 2018 should be among the top favorites for the 2026 edition. Perhaps only Spain and England are faring better with tipsters. Save for the 2020 European Championships, even when France is not firing on all cylinders, it still manages to make it to the crunch time of major tournaments, as was the case at an otherwise painful 2024 Euros. Manager Didier Deschamps' men didn't thrill anyone during the 2026 World Cup qualifiers, where they only encountered modest-to-middling opposition—but then, they rarely do.

One thing which has changed is that, for the first time since the 2014 World Cup, Les Bleus will arrive at their Boston base camp without the most influential player of the Deschamps era, the man he called "irreplaceable"—Antoine Griezmann, who provided more than goals and assists; he also combined the instincts of a striker with the grit of a defensive midfielder and the vision of a playmaker. He was the oil that ran through the French engine and the thread that connected the lines from back to front. Judging by recent performances, post-Griezmann France has yet to find a real rhythm. It is capable of breaking through any defense, especially on counter-attacks where the astonishing pace (and deadly finishing) of its attacking trio can overrun any opposition; but it can also struggle to find breaks and create chances from possession play. Few people would bet against Deschamps' winning machine, but doubts remain as to how well it will function.

MATTEO CIAMBELLI/DEFODI IMAGES VIA GETTY IMAGES; OPPOSITE: ANP VIA GETTY IMAGES

WORLD CUP APPEARANCES 17 | **WORLD CUP CHAMPIONSHIPS** 1★

KYLIAN MBAPPÉ

FORWARDS

In terms of individual talents, no other team at the World Cup can boast superior firepower to the French, who have such an embarrassment of riches upfront that players of the caliber of Marcus Thuram, Kingsley Coman, or even Hugo Ekitike have no guarantees they'll be among the chosen 23 when Deschamps announces his squad in mid-May. The talented Michael Olise of Bayern Munich looks to be preferred to Manchester City's Rayan Cherki in the number 10 role, despite the latter's occasional brushes with genius.

Deschamps will always go for industry over artistry. As to the front three, when you have the reigning Ballon d'Or Ousmane Dembélé on one wing, the 2025 UEFA Champions League final and Club World Cup's best player Désiré Doué on the other, plus PSG and Real Madrid record-breaker Kylian Mbappé at the tip of the attack, well, you are in business; or should be, as it hasn't always been the case of late. France no longer has a "target man" à la Olivier Giroud—none of those three is known for his heading prowess or his tendency to protect the ball in 50-50 situations—but this is more than compensated by mobility, outrageous skill, and dribbling ability. The combination is frightening both on paper and on the field of play when it clicks.

MIDFIELD

If there is a "problem area" for Deschamps' team, this is it. There'll be no lack of bite and energy in the French midfield, regardless of whether it is 35-year-old N'Golo Kanté, whose surprise return against Ukraine last autumn was a success, Manu Koné, or even Adrien Rabiot who lines up alongside the dependable Aurélien Tchouaméni behind number 10 Olise. Solid as this combination will be, it is lacking in the kind of creativity Griezmann used to provide, which can make France look somewhat one-dimensional and disjointed in possession when compared with other title contenders like Spain, Portugal, or even England, which all feature number 6s who can play as 8s or even 10s. The hopes placed in youngsters Eduardo Camavinga and Warren Zaïre-Emery haven't fully been fulfilled yet, and a lack of goals from midfielders, Olise excepted, remains a concern.

MICHAEL OLISE

DEFENSE

William Saliba's superb performances in the Premier League with Arsenal have finally put to bed Deschamps' doubts about the defender, who has brought the French back line something it lacked since the retirement of Raphaël Varane: a ball-playing center back far more capable and sophisticated in his distribution than Ibrahima Konaté will ever be, and a perfect foil for the uncompromising Dayot Upamecano in central defense. The fullback situation is less clear. If Jules Koundé, a reconverted center back, has now nailed his spot on the right, there are no such certainties on the left flank, where Aston Villa's Lucas Digne, also useful for the quality of his dead-ball deliveries, now looks to be preferred to Theo Hernández.

KEY TO THE CUP

Kylian Mbappé, who else? His qualifying-round stats of eight goals and five assists in his last six games for France in 2025 are now considered normal for the greatest goal-scoring sensation France has produced since Just Fontaine. The French captain has his detractors at home, who find him aloof and too immersed in his own game; but even they know what they owe him. France will only go as far as Mbappé's talents can take them.

PROJECTED STARTING XI

G	MIKE MAIGNAN
D	LUCAS DIGNE
D	WILLIAM SALIBA
D	DAYOT UPAMECANO
D	JULES KOUNDÉ
MF	AURÉLIEN TCHOUAMÉNI
MF	N'GOLO KANTÉ
MF	MICHAEL OLISE
F	OUSMANE DEMBÉLÉ
F	KYLIAN MBAPPÉ
F	DÉSIRÉ DOUÉ

GOALKEEPER

Deschamps will pray that France's unchallenged No. 1 keeper Mike Maignan, a towering presence in the dressing room as in goal, is fully fit, as his likely deputy, PSG's Laurent Charbonnier, is having an up-and-down season with the European champions. Backup Alphonse Areola no longer features for West Ham (Premier League) and Brice Samba's form with Rennes (France) has been indifferent. Maignan, on the other hand, has remained a formidable keeper for AC Milan, whose fans celebrated his recent contract extension as they would have welcomed a title. "Magic Mike" is an imposing figure (6'3", 196 pounds), whose consistency, bravery, and super-sharp reflexes on his line already make him one of the best in the world at his position. He first trained as a midfielder and has retained ballplaying abilities that few other keepers can match. He is the de facto first playmaker for Deschamps' team, a key man whose presence, in every sense of the word, is a must for France's success.

OFF THE BENCH

France's options from the bench vary significantly from line to line, with alternative options for goalkeeper and fullback positions on the light side, even if Chelsea right-back Malo Gusto has scored a few points of late. There is depth in the squad elsewhere, with this caveat: Deschamps does not really have potential game-changing subs comparable in number, quality, and diversity to the players fellow manager Thomas Tuchel can call upon for England, for example. What young forward Bradley Barcola can bring to the table is not that different from what Doué would. The exception is Cherki, a born improviser who, however, has yet to fully convince in a France shirt. This also applies, to a lesser extent, to Monaco midfielder Maghnes Akliouche.

COACH AND STYLE

This is very much a team built in Deschamps' image. "DD" is an arch-pragmatist whose approach to the game was molded during his years playing and coaching in Italy. Defensive solidity, combativeness, and tactical discipline are paramount, as illustrated by his insistence on fielding a double defensive pivot in the midfield of his standard 4-2-3-1 formation. His competitive record, by some distance the best of any current international manager, has not shielded him from criticism at home. It is felt that he is not exploiting the extraordinary wealth and depth of attacking talent at his disposal as much as he should. France's lackluster performances at the 2024 Euros are a case in point: his team reached yet another semifinal, conceding just one goal in five games before falling to eventual winners Spain, but scored only one goal in open play. However, Deschamps can make audacious choices when the situation requires him to do so, as when he deployed Griezmann as a deep-lying playmaker at the 2022 World Cup. The '26 World Cup will be DD's last tournament as French manager, perhaps a chance to give a freer rein to his players this time. His country certainly hopes so.

OUSMANE DEMBELE

RICO BROUWER/SOCCRATES/GETTY IMAGES

MATCH DAYS

GAME 1
- → Tuesday, June 16 vs. Senegal
- → MetLife Stadium, New York/New Jersey
- → 3 pm ET

GAME 2
- → Monday, June 22 vs. Iraq
- → Lincoln Financial Field, Philadelphia
- → 5 pm ET

GAME 3
- → Friday, June 26 vs. Norway
- → Gillette Stadium, Boston
- → 3 pm ET

WHAT TO EXPECT

Senegal and Norway (with Erling Haaland) make for a tough group stage, but it would be a shock if France did not clear that hurdle. The team would probably face a daunting Round of 16 afterwards: should they top Group I, Germany might lie in wait; should they qualify in second place, it would be Brazil. Either France will exit the competition at an early stage, or will remain in contention until the final.

ENGLAND

2026 WORLD CUP PREDICTION
QUARTERFINAL

CAPITAL: LONDON • POP: 58.6 MILLION • SOCCER = FOOTBALL • FIRST WORLD CUP: 1950 • NATIONAL TEAM NICKNAME: THE THREE LIONS

GROUP L

England's obsession with carrying the World Cup back to the sport's spiritual home has not been realized since 1966. Since then, it has been a constant tale of heartache. Several near misses—compounded by regular woe in penalty shootouts—have added to the pain as the country that gave the game to the world has failed to add another star to its jersey. The conclusion must be, therefore, that they have not been good enough—however brutal a truth that is for England supporters to digest.

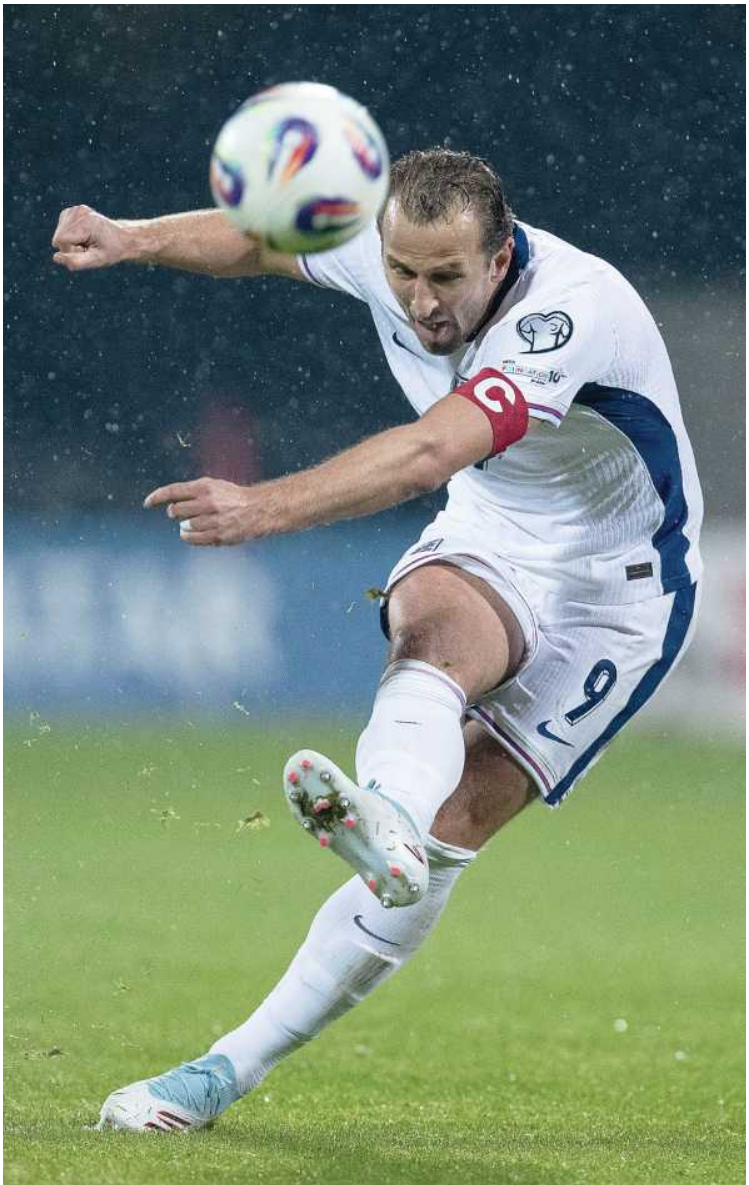
That being the case, is there any reason to believe this time it will be any different?

On the face of it, yes.

The team is full of international experience. It sailed through its qualifying group and reached the final of the last major tournament it contested—the European Championships—two years ago. In German manager Thomas Tuchel there is a wealth of knowledge in dealing with elite footballers. Although it must be said, he is stepping into the unknown as far as World Cup football is concerned—it's his first in charge.

But Tuchel's squad will not be filled with rookies. All of them will know what's at stake. With a fair wind and a clean bill of health through the spine of his team during the tournament, there is reason to believe that England can go deep in the competition.

And the nation, as ever, expects.



WORLD CUP APPEARANCES **17** | WORLD CUP CHAMPIONSHIPS **1** ★

HARRY KANE

SEBASTIAN FREJ/GETTY IMAGES

FORWARDS

Front and center will be England's greatest goal-getter—Harry Kane, a man who will doubtless feature heavily in the pre-tournament chatter about who will end up with the Golden Boot. Kane has been in rude form in front of goal, ever since he moved from the Premier League to Germany's Bayern Munich two seasons ago. His strike rate for the Bavarian giants is almost one per game. Kane's influence as captain and as the talisman of this England team is undisputed.

There is only one question for Tuchel. Who plays around him? The list is long.

Ollie Watkins has popped up with important goals—note his winner in the European Championship semifinal against the Netherlands two years ago. Bukayo Saka remains a favorite. And his Arsenal (Premier League) teammate

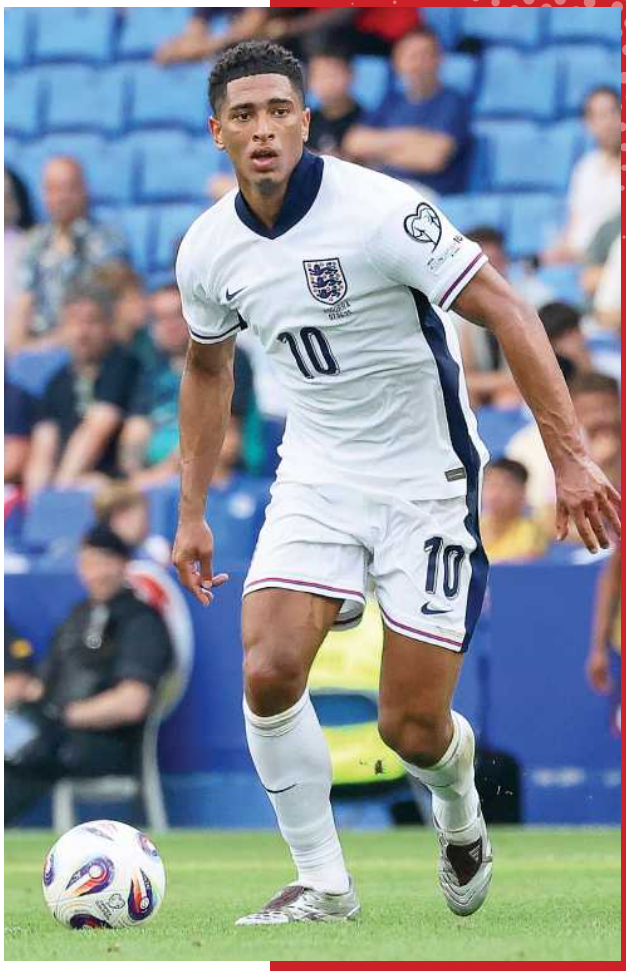
Eberechi Eze has the ability to unlock defenses at the highest level, while Phil Foden has been deployed in patches at Manchester City this season. Marcus Rashford also remains in the picture—though not an automatic choice—at Barcelona. West Ham captain Jarrod Bowen now boasts 20 caps, but just one goal, for his country. He offers an alternative out wide. Aston Villa's Morgan Rogers has turned himself into Mr. Dependable for his country as well as his club. The former West Bromwich Albion (Championship) academy star boasts the enviable skill of being able to move with the ball at pace.

In short, Tuchel has his choice of players who are capable of producing moments that matter. And, in Kane, the team has a genuine world-class striking talent. Scoring goals should not be a problem.

MIDFIELD

Tuchel has not been afraid to challenge the status quo in his engine room. And that has been good news for one player in particular—Nottingham Forest's Elliot Anderson. Anderson has been an undoubted beneficiary during Tuchel's reign, establishing himself as a go-to guy.

While Arsenal's Declan Rice remains the pivot—and a shoo-in for selection—the same cannot be said of the erstwhile darling of English football, Jude Bellingham. The relationship between Bellingham and Tuchel has been strained on a number of levels.



JUDE BELLINGHAM

KEY TO THE CUP

Dealing with the demands of travel and the heat of the Americas will both need careful consideration. But then, that goes for every team. Of more significance to Tuchel will be wrapping Harry Kane in cotton wool and not using him every single minute of every single game during the group stages. Tuchel must manage Kane's minutes and hope for good luck with injuries. It's inconceivable to think England could win the World Cup without him. With Kane? It's possible.

And questions have been raised as to whether Tuchel can fit Bellingham *and* Rogers into the same XI. All of which has benefited midfielders such as Crystal Palace's Adam Wharton, whose languid style is complemented by a sharp footballing brain.

Veteran Jordan Henderson has enjoyed a solid season at Brentford following his move from Ajax (Netherlands). The former Liverpool captain, now 35, will add valuable know-how in what will surely be his last international tournament.

DEFENSE

The fiercest competition for a spot on Tuchel's squad undoubtedly takes place at center back. Marc Guéhi's move to Manchester City has elevated his status. And probably at the right time. He had been one of the Premier League's most consistent performers for his previous club, Crystal Palace. Ezri Konsa is the

PROJECTED STARTING XI

G	JORDAN PICKFORD
D	REECE JAMES
D	EZRI KONSA
D	MARC GUÉHI
D	NICO O'REILLY
M	DECLAN RICE
M	ELLIOT ANDERSON
F	JUDE BELLINGHAM
F	MORGAN ROGERS
F	BUKAYO SAKA
F	HARRY KANE

JOAN VALLS/URBANANDSPORT/NURPHOTO VIA GETTY IMAGES

current recognized partner of choice in the middle. The Aston Villa man, however, struggled during the second half of the 2025-26 season as a series of injuries decimated the club's midfield, leaving him with scant cover.

Dan Burn has been used on more than a few occasions, and his size and threat from set-pieces are an obvious route to goal that England's boss will not be afraid to use.

Kyle Walker's retirement from international football was unexpected. The veteran defender had been invaluable to his country. But Chelsea's Reece James looks set to take his mantle. James can operate in a number of positions. That versatility could be invaluable if England do go deep.

On the other side of defense, Nico O'Reilly has stepped into the void left by Myles Lewis-Skelly, whose form dipped during the second half of Arsenal's campaign.

GOALKEEPER

Jordan Pickford's performances for Everton have cemented his position in the eyes of England's manager. The keeper has been in sparkling form for his club, and he is another who has been through the highs and lows with the Three Lions. If Pickford is injured, Crystal Palace's Dean Henderson is the next in line. He has limited exposure at the international level but is at home on the big stage. He started his club career at Manchester United and will be used to the pressure that will come with the spotlight.

OFF THE BENCH

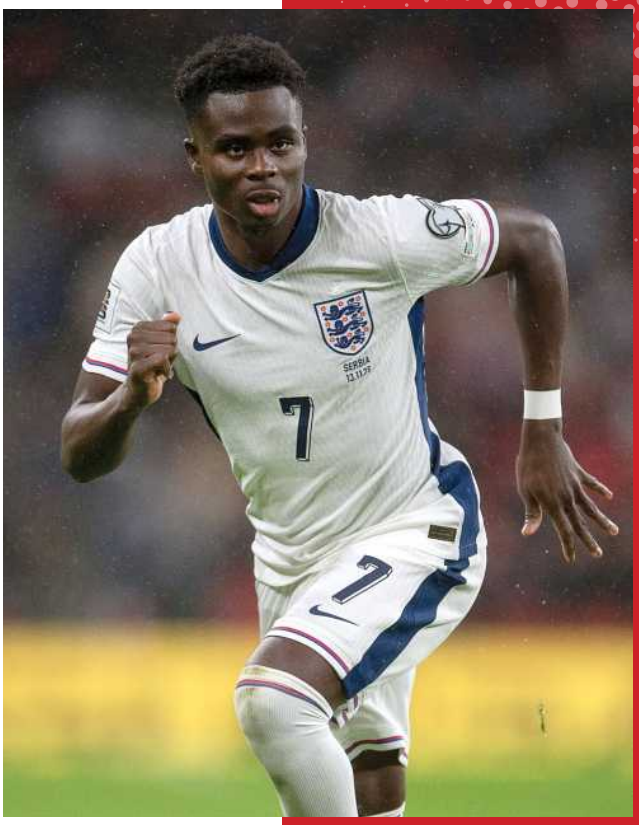
Tuchel is fortunate. He has options aplenty. He can quickly change the dynamic of his side. If he wants another No. 10, for instance, he could use either Foden or Chelsea's Cole Palmer. The only option he does not really possess is an imposing, physical target man—or a direct replacement for Kane. Elsewhere, however, he is well covered by a deep and experienced list of players.

COACH AND STYLE

Tuchel is well-known to the English public following his time in charge at Chelsea, which gave him a head start after he took the reins from former England boss Gareth Southgate. Tuchel could do little more than what he achieved during qualifying. The Three Lions cruised through the group stage, winning all eight games. What's more, they didn't concede a single goal, either. He was rewarded by the Football Association with a contract extension beyond this year's World Cup.

However, England traditionally have failed to master a possession-based style that may be necessary in the heat of North America. Shielding his center halves in a 4-2-3-1 formation is likely to be the way he goes.

JOE PRIOR/VISIONHAUS VIA GETTY IMAGES



BUKAYO SAKA

MATCH DAYS

GAME 1
→ Wednesday, June 17 vs. Croatia
→ AT&T Stadium, Dallas
→ 4 pm ET

GAME 2
→ Tuesday, June 23 vs. Ghana
→ Gillette Stadium, Boston
→ 4 pm ET

GAME 3
→ Saturday, June 27 vs. Panama
→ MetLife Stadium, New York/New Jersey
5 pm ET

WHAT TO EXPECT

Tuchel's immediate reaction to the draw was "difficult opener, difficult group." On reflection, that may not be the case. Croatia are not the team they were when defeating England in the 2018 semifinal in Russia, as Luka Modric is now into his 40s. And neither are Ghana, who failed to qualify for the latest Africa Cup of Nations. England smashed six goals past Panama the last time the two countries met in 2018. So England should escape to the knockout phase with ease. They will then face one of the third-place group teams in the last 32. That all looks comfortable. But then, potentially, Mexico and Brazil await—with Portugal or Argentina ahead.

PORTUGAL

2026 WORLD CUP PREDICTION
SEMIFINAL

CAPITAL: LISBON • POP: 10.8 MILLION • SOCCER = FUTEBOL ^FIRST WORLD CUP: 1966 • NATIONAL TEAM NICKNAME: SELEÇÃO DAS QUINAS

Can Portugal send its legendary leader Cristiano Ronaldo into the luxury of a blissful retirement with the ultimate prize of World Cup glory?

It would be one of soccer's greatest fairy tale finishes, perhaps even surpassing the magical moment enjoyed by CR7's great personal rival Lionel Messi in 2022. And it's perfectly possible, because this Portugal squad is packed full of world-class performers who have proven their talents with a dazzling selection of the game's greatest club sides. Possessing a still-deadly goalscorer with the unmatched motivation of heading into his last World Cup is the cherry on the cake, and the biggest challenge for manager Roberto Martínez is molding a team that can get the best out of Cristiano without becoming over-reliant upon him.

The signs are promising, especially when Portugal proved it can beat the best by winning last summer's UEFA Nations League, overcoming Germany and Spain (albeit after a penalty shootout) to lift the trophy. World Cup qualifying wasn't straightforward, but the shock of a 2-0 defeat in Ireland was soon overcome with a 9-1 thrashing of Armenia to secure progression.

For this highly talented group of players, that should be just the beginning.

MIGUEL LEMOS/NURPHOTO VIA GETTY IMAGES; OPPOSITE: MARCO STEINBRENNER/DEFODI IMAGES/DEFODI VIA GETTY IMAGES

WORLD CUP APPEARANCES 17 | WORLD CUP CHAMPIONSHIPS 0

CRISTIANO RONALDO

FORWARDS

When your forward line is led by one of the most prolific goalscorers of all-time, it's obvious that he must start every game and play every minute as the unwavering focal point of the attack.

Or is it?

Cristiano Ronaldo is, of course, an iconic, legendary leader and still a potent force as he rapidly approaches the mind-boggling milestone of 1,000 career goals. But he is 41 years old, and it's wildly unrealistic to expect him to last the full pace for up to eight games in five weeks, contested across multiple time zones in the sweltering summer sun. Martínez must therefore pick and choose how and when to use his prize asset—and Cristiano's larger-than-life persona is powerful enough to greatly complicate the task of telling him not to play soccer and instead sit on the bench.

There's even an argument that Cristiano could be best employed as an impact substitute, especially during the knockout stages, when the case for having him on the field at the end of the action, especially with the potential for extra time

and penalty shootouts, is irresistible. Nevertheless, he is likely to start most—or maybe all—games, and the squad's other frontmen will have to settle for supplementary support roles.

The options are plentiful: Gonçalo Ramos is a natural alternative to Cristiano through the middle and averages a goal every other international appearance; João Félix is an endlessly gifted but equally inconsistent playmaker; Francisco Conceição, Rafael Leão, and Pedro Neto are all creative wingers who can break open defenses with skill and speed. This is most definitely not a case of "Cristiano plus 10 more."

One man notable by his absence, however, is Diogo Jota, who tragically died in a car crash last July. Lifting the cup in his honor will be a major motivation for his former teammates.

MIDFIELD

Paris Saint-Germain's best midfielder, Manchester City's best midfielder, Manchester United's best midfielder—there's no more gifted central trio at the World Cup than Vitinha, Bernardo Silva, and Bruno Fernandes, who also provide an enviably experienced and settled core with nearly 250 international appearances between them.

Of the three, Vitinha is the youngest and least seasoned, but also the most indispensable for his ability to knit play together. A gifted technician who demands constant possession and rarely wastes it, an accurate indication of the 26-year-old's unmatched influence is the fact that he made 23 percent more passes than any other player during this season's UEFA Champions League group stage.

With Vitinha pulling the strings, the clever creativity of Silva and Fernandes—both probably appearing at their last World Cup—is granted the freedom to roam around the margins of the opposition penalty area and create openings for Cristiano. Fernandes also offers a potent goal threat with his shooting from outside the penalty area, and supplies arguably the best set-piece deliveries in the world.

The only concern is whether this trio provides enough defensive cover, so coach Martínez could choose to sacrifice one of them—or field Silva as a winger—to bring in the defensive strength of veteran Rúben Neves or rising star João Neves. Whoever is selected, the Portuguese midfield certainly doesn't suffer from a lack of quality; finding the right balance between defense and attack is the challenge.

DEFENSE

Portugal's back line is anchored by the unmistakable presence of Rúben Dias, a four-time Premier League champion with Manchester City who has been hailed by famed coach José Mourinho as the "best central defender in the world." Few

VITINHA

PROJECTED STARTING XI

GK	DIOGO COSTA
D	JOÃO CANCELO
D	GONÇALO INÁCIO
D	RÚBEN DIAS
D	NUNO MENDES
MF	RÚBEN NEVES
MF	VITINHA
MF	BRUNO FERNANDES
MF	BERNARDO SILVA
F	CRISTIANO RONALDO
F	PEDRO NETO

KEY TO THE CUP

Cristiano Ronaldo is clearly a blessing for any team on earth, but he could also become a curse if coach Martínez feels obliged to overuse his veteran captain to the detriment of his other highly talented options. Soccer is now a 16-man game and Martínez must manage his bench wisely, perhaps even taking the tough decision of occasionally leaving CR7 sitting on it. With the right balance, everything is possible.

would argue. A physically imposing player who dominates in the air and never shies away from a crunching tackle, Dias is also an inspiring leader whose role in defense matches the importance of Ronaldo at the other end of the field.

His companions aren't too shabby, either. Marauding left back Nuno Mendes is also widely regarded as the game's best in his position; he was one of only two defenders to make the top 10 in last year's Ballon d'Or voting. On the other flank, experienced maverick João Cancelo has warmed up for the World Cup by bringing back his silky skills to the rigors of European football for a second spell at Barcelona (Spain), completing arguably the tournament's most entertaining and attacking fullback tandem.

The likely central companion for Dias in the center is the emerging talent of Sporting Lisbon's Gonçalo Inácio, whose speed and anticipation make him a perfect complement to the more rugged attributes of his senior partner. Other important squad members are the versatile duo of Diogo Dalot and Renato Veiga, and a strong set of defensive options is completed by veteran right back Nélson Semedo.

GOALKEEPER

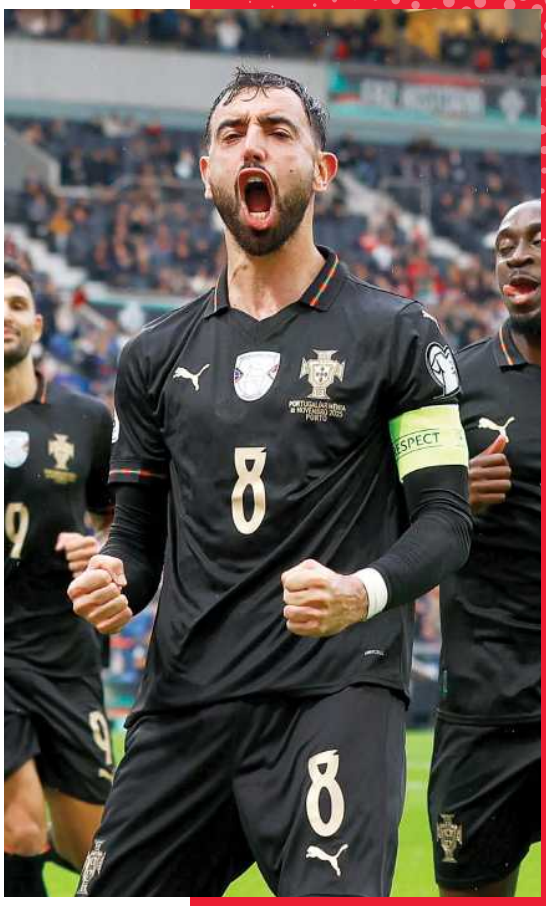
Diogo Costa is firmly ensconced as Portugal's No. 1 keeper, solidifying his place by playing every minute during the World Cup qualifying campaign. The 26-year-old Porto (Portugal) keeper is a thoroughly modern exponent of his position, thriving in Martínez's possession-based approach thanks to his comfort on the ball and his ability to pass accurately. He is also an excellent shot-stopper, with a particular knack for saving penalties most dramatically displayed when he kept out three of Slovenia's shootout attempts in the 2024 Euros quarterfinals. This ability could prove decisive in the knockout rounds, and Costa is unlikely to face serious competition for the starting role. In case of injury, he's backed up by a pair of veterans with little past international experience: José Sá and Rui Silva.

OFF THE BENCH

Portugal is blessed with a multitude of match-winning options off the bench, which is just as well considering the advanced ages of key performers in attack like Cristiano (41) and Fernandes and Silva (both 31). Conceição is a particularly exciting talent on the right wing, and still relatively unknown on the international stage after only making his debut in 2024. Through the middle, Ramos is a versatile performer and prolific scorer who would be an automatic starter for most national teams.

COACH AND STYLE

Martínez spent the vast majority of his playing career and his early managerial appointments in the UK and has developed an effective blend of his home country's possession-based style and his adopted nation's more direct, physical characteristics. He's also highly experienced in navigating the demands of an intense summer tournament after previously leading Belgium to a pair of successful World Cup campaigns.



BRUNO FERNANDES

MATCH DAYS

GAME 1
- → Wednesday, June 17 vs. DR Congo
- → NRG Stadium, Houston
- → 1 pm ET

GAME 2
- → Tuesday, June 23 vs. Uzbekistan
- → NRG Stadium, Houston
- → 1 pm ET

GAME 3
- → Saturday, June 27 vs. Colombia
- → Hard Rock Stadium, Miami
- → 7:30 pm ET

WHAT TO EXPECT

Handling Houston's heat to overcome lowly opposition shouldn't be a problem in Portugal's opening two games, but the final group meeting with Colombia—which is likely to decide first and second place—could be much more challenging, especially if local Miami support favors the opponent. And winning the group is crucial, because the runnerup will almost certainly be paired against England or Croatia in the first knockout round.

ERIC VERHOEVEN/SOCCRATES/GETTY IMAGES

NETHERLANDS

2026 WORLD CUP PREDICTION
ROUND OF 16

CAPITAL: AMSTERDAM • POP: 18 MILLION • SOCCER = VOETBAL • FIRST WORLD CUP: 1934 • NATIONAL TEAM NICKNAME: ORANJE

GROUP F

A World Cup must have its dark horses, and a strong candidate for that role is this maturing Dutch team, which seems to be finding its feet just at the right moment. Despite their relative youth, most of the group of players who will travel to America in June will have experienced Qatar 2022, a tournament that came too soon for much of the current crop, but still ended in the quarterfinals (where they lost on penalties to eventual champ Argentina). Ronald Koeman's side now has a settled system (4-3-3), a settled first XI—in which only a couple of spots are a matter for debate—decent backups, and an enviable array of alternative plans to switch to. The three-time finalists look in good shape, with no rumors of dissent filtering from their camp (for a change), a reassuring balance between younger and older players, and no unrealistic expectations to live up to.

WORLD CUP APPEARANCES **13** | WORLD CUP CHAMPIONSHIPS **0**

VIRGIL VAN DIJK

GEERT VAN ERVEN/SOCCRATES/GETTY IMAGES

FORWARDS

Memphis, as Memphis Depay now prefers to be called, plays with Corinthians in Brazil and is about to play in his third World Cup despite missing out on 2018. He remains the focal point at number 9, a dynamic, muscular striker with a fierce shot and over a goal every two games to his name for his country. Creator and finisher Cody Gakpo of Liverpool (Premier League) will be by his side in the left channel and ready to slot in the middle if need be. As to what happens on the other side, we do not know yet. Xavi Simons, who tends to drift inside and could never be described as an out-and-out "winger" is the favorite for that spot, as right back Denzel Dumfries will spring forward far more often than Nathan Aké on the other side; but Donyell Malen could feature, or even the versatile Justin Kluivert. Another option would be to play Liverpool fullback Jeremie Frimpong farther up the pitch. One of the

Netherlands' strengths is that they will be able to pose different kinds of attacking threats according to the opposition and the game situation, while sticking to the same 4-3-3 formation.

MIDFIELD

There are few more attractive combinations in world football than the Netherlands' three-man midfield of Ryan Gravenberch (the smart blocker/interceptor/destroyer with an eye for a pass and a decent shot); Tijjani Reijnders (subtle but tough and elegant, always willing to surge into the opposing penalty area); and Frenkie de Jong (the architect, the creator, the inventor of space). Leave the ball with them, be too passive, and you'll be in trouble. A concern will be that this wonderfully skilful trio could be physically overrun by aggressive opposition. Attrition will not suit them, a fact that will not have escaped their opponents.

DEFENSE

A team on which top players Stefan de Vrij, Matthijs de Ligt, and Micky van de Ven will probably be watching from the bench at the World Cup clearly has no lack of top quality defenders. Captain Virgil van Dijk and Arsenal (Premier League) right back Jurriën Timber are Koeman's go-to combination in central defense, with Aké at left back and, if fully fit, Dumfries on the opposite flank, from which the Inter player (who suffered an awful ankle injury last year) can launch his signature raids and wreak havoc in the opposition half. Should Dumfries be short of fitness, Timber will revert to his Arsenal right back slot, with de Ligt called upon to partner van Dijk in the middle.

Whoever is chosen will provide far more than purely defensive contributions. All are cultured ballplayers, and van Dijk's ability to spray impeccable 50-plus-meter passes into the path of his attackers is a key component of the Dutch game. The one concern does not lie in the defense itself, but in the relative lack of protection offered by a midfield geared more towards creation than defending. Getting the creative playmakers in front of them to help slow down opponents' attacks will go a long way to helping the Dutch defense succeed.

MEMPHIS

HENK JAN DIJKS/MARCEL TER BALS/DEFODI IMAGES/DEFODI VIA GETTY IMAGES

KEY TO THE CUP

Danger can come from many sources in the Dutch team, but Denzel Dumfries can provide the X-factor. The powerful right back has the energy, the skill, and the crossing ability needed to unbalance any defense. He's a potential match-winner, whom Koeman will pray is fully fit come June.

PROJECTED STARTING XI

G	BART VERBRUGGEN
D	NATHAN AKÉ
D	VIRGIL VAN DIJK
D	JURRIËN TIMBER
D	DENZEL DUMFRIES
MF	RYAN GRAVENBERCH
MF	FRENKIE DE JONG
MF	TIJJANI REIJNDERS
F	XAVI SIMONS
F	MEMPHIS
F	CODY GAKPO

GOALKEEPER

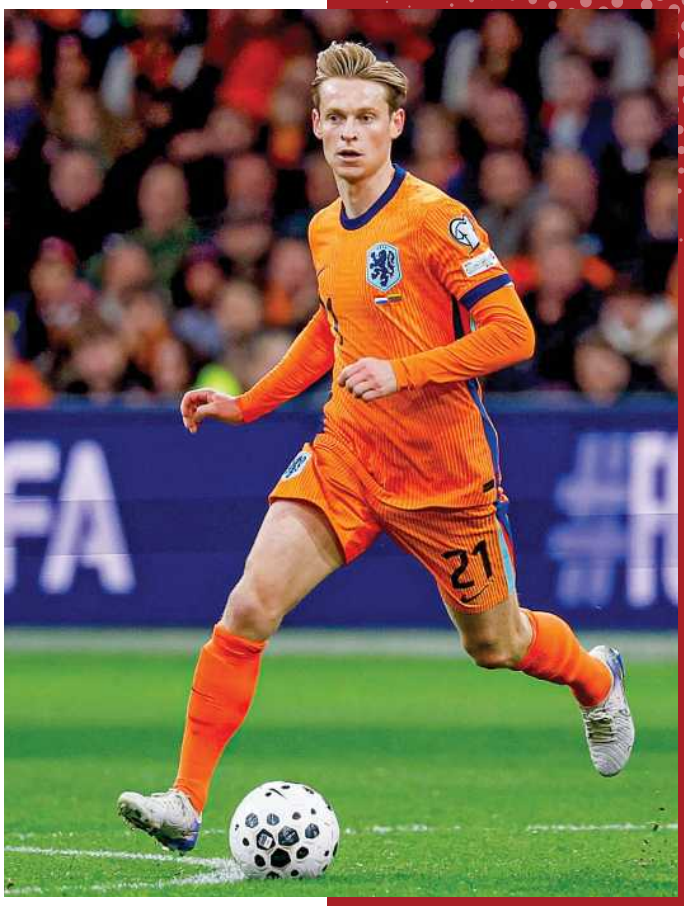
Eyebrows were raised when Brighton & Hove Albion, not reputed for their extravagant spending, paid over $20 million in 2023 for Bart Verbruggen, a then-21-year-old keeper who'd played a grand total of 17 games for Anderlecht in Belgium's top division. Not any longer. Verbruggen is now the undisputed No. 1 for club and country, and has been a transfer target for top Premier League clubs. This is not to say he is up to former Dutch star Edwin van der Sar yet. Verbruggen is a superb shot-stopper and an imposing figure in his area, but his distribution could still improve, and he has been known to have lapses of concentration which proved costly, for Brighton in particular. No one doubts that his age rather than his talent is to blame for any lapses. Verbruggen remains a work in progress, but progress has been quick.

OFF THE BENCH

Koeman has a rare thing at his disposal: genuine potential game-changers. Two of them stand out: Kluivert and Malen. The former can be used as a number 9, a number 10, or even a winger, and can shoot from distance, dribble, and finish, sometimes spectacularly. The latter, perhaps the greatest natural attacking talent on this Dutch team, certainly the most unpredictable, is primarily a winger who has pace, skill, and, when he's in the mood, physical presence, too. A Malen firing on all cylinders would be a guaranteed starter in the Dutch XI, and many other top international sides. The problem is that he can go missing for long periods of a game, which explains why his progress at Chelsea and Aston Villa in the Premier League has not been as smooth as it should have been. Koeman also has the option to call on the veteran man-mountain Wout Weghorst, who did wonders in 2022, should the game situation require an injection of chaos.

COACH AND STYLE

This is Koeman's second stint at the helm of the Oranje, after the first (2018–20) was cut short by Barcelona calling on its former star player. Koeman, who regularly used a 3-4-3 formation when he reclaimed the national team job from Louis van Gaal in 2022, has reverted to the traditional Dutch 4-3-3 over the past two seasons, with which his team was undefeated in the qualifiers and gave Spain an almighty fright in the UEFA Nations League quarterfinals a year ago. The varied profiles of the players he can field in most positions make for a team that is eminently flexible and which will undoubtedly test the ingenuity of opposition coaches, should Koeman make the best use of its versatility, which he seems prepared to do.



FRENKIE DE JONG

MARCEL TER BALS/DEFODI IMAGES/DEFODI VIA GETTY IMAGES

MATCH DAYS

GAME 1
- → Sunday, June 14 vs. Japan
- → AT&T Stadium, Dallas
- → 4 pm ET

GAME 2
- → Saturday, June 20 vs. Sweden
- → NRG Stadium, Houston
- → 1 pm ET

GAME 3
- → Thursday, June 25 vs. Tunisia
- → Arrowhead Stadium, Kansas City
- → 7 pm ET

WHAT TO EXPECT

With the exception of Spain, most top teams enter the Cup with uncertainties. The Dutch have the potential of going deep in the tournament, but on one condition: given their draw, they must hit the ground running. Their group is trickier than it seems, with Japan, Tunisia, and, Sweden to contend with. Then, possibly, African powerhouse Morocco in the round of 32. Everything will be possible after that; but it is a demanding start to the tournament. Should they set the right tone from the beginning, the Dutch could surprise a few heavyweights on the way.

BRAZIL

2026 WORLD CUP PREDICTION
QUARTERFINAL

CAPITAL: BRASILIA • POP: 206 MILLION • SOCCER = FUTEBOL • FIRST WORLD CUP: 1930 • NATIONAL TEAM NICKNAME: SELEÇÃO CANARINHO

When the fireworks and drone shows over Copacabana Beach faded on New Year's Day, Brazilian TV network Globo wasted no time pivoting to what matters most in 2026. Their World Cup campaign launched almost immediately, and this cycle is unlike any the network has navigated before.

Rumo ao Hexa—the Road to the Sixth—is a slogan Globo has dusted off for five consecutive World Cup cycles. This time, the face of the campaign is manager Carlo Ancelotti. He steps into arguably the biggest national team job on the planet without the star-studded arsenal his predecessors enjoyed, yet carries the weight of a 24-year title drought on his shoulders. Win this Cup, and Ancelotti achieves his coaching magnum opus—the first foreign manager in history to lift the World Cup for Brazil with a national team.

This Brazil side may be the most question-marked squad the Seleção has sent into a tournament in decades. Not even the 2002 champions—a side riddled with turmoil and coaching upheaval, written off while Argentina strutted as favorites—arrived with this many doubts swirling around them. The 2002 team's success offers Brazil's fans a sliver of hope, but beyond that romantic comparison, the current squad is, by name value alone, one of the most underwhelming in memory.

FRANCO ARLAND/GETTY IMAGES; OPPOSITE: RUANO CARNEIRO/GETTY IMAGES

WORLD CUP APPEARANCES 23 | **WORLD CUP CHAMPIONSHIPS** 5 ★★★★★

VÍNICIUS JÚNIOR

FORWARDS

Neymar, at 33, remains the great Brazilian hope—and the great Brazilian question mark. Four years ago he seemed destined to breathe the same air as Messi and Ronaldo. Today, he's fighting to prove he belongs on the pitch at all. Since returning to Santos (Brazil), he's spent far more time rehabbing than playing, offering only fleeting flashes of the genius that once made defenders tremble. Ancelotti, notably, did not call him up.

That might change, however. In December, Neymar grabbed a microphone at a pagode concert for singer Thiaguinho, declaring to the crowd that Brazil would do "the possible and the impossible" to bring home the Cup—then pointedly called on Ancelotti to bring him into the fold. Bold words. Whether he backs them up on the pitch is the defining subplot of Brazil's tournament. Then, Neymar was not on a late March roster. Hmm.

Beyond Neymar, the forward line holds talent—though none of it sets pulses racing. The Vinícius Júnior paradox is perhaps the most confounding storyline Ancelotti must solve. At Real Madrid, "Vini" is a game-wrecker, a player who wins Ballons d'Or and Champions League finals. Pull on the yellow and green, and something dims. The urgency, the directness, the ruthlessness—it doesn't travel.

Brazil expected to have Rodrygo in this conversation, but a knee injury in March cut short his plans to join the national team. In his place, Brazil may find room for Estêvão, who is slowly carving out his place at Chelsea (Premier League), while Endrick—who stagnated at Real Madrid—has rediscovered himself at Lyon (France), recapturing the explosive confidence that made him a sensation at Palmeiras (Brazil). Richarlison, meanwhile, is running out of runway. Three years of fading form mean his form this spring will determine whether he gets another shot to achieve = his World Cup ambitions.

MIDFIELD

Every great Brazil side has carried a transcendent midfielder—a player who bends the tempo of a match to his will. This squad does not have one. If Neymar is off the table, what remains is a collection of capable, professional players who collectively lack the spark that turns good teams into champions.

Andreas Pereira is competent, not commanding. Bruno Guimarães works hard and covers ground, but he is not the orchestrating presence Brazil's midfield once boasted. Lucas Paquetá returned to Flamengo (Brazil) in the most expensive transfer in South American football history, yet big price tags don't manufacture big moments.

Casemiro anchors the midfield and should partner with Guimarães in a double pivot. The shape Ancelotti deploys will likely determine who plays where: a 4-2-3-1 could slot Paquetá at the No. 10, with Vinícius Júnior, Raphinha, Estevão, or Luiz Henrique fanning out ahead of him—and perhaps Neymar, should Ancelotti eventually make the call.

DEFENSE

The fullback position tells the story of how far Brazilian football has drifted from its roots. The days of Cafu marauding down the right and Roberto Carlos launching thunderbolts from the left are long gone. Today's Brazilian fullbacks rarely bomb forward with the same ferocity or frequency, and the width and attacking dynamism those legends provided—stretching defenses, creating overloads, terrorizing opposing wingers—has quietly disappeared from the national team's tactical identity. No one in the current pool has filled that creative void.

KEY TO THE CUP

If Neymar were on this list, this section would have already been 15 words too long. That said, there is a player who is exceling in his position and that is Raphinha. If there is a player that could make many forget about the Santos star, it could be him. At Barcelona, he's the player who makes that team play with effectiveness and panache. With Brazil, he puts the team in third gear. Keeping in mind how this version of Brazil have played, that is quite the compliment.

BRUNO GUIMARÃES

PROJECTED STARTING XI

GK ALISSON
D DANILO
D MARQUINHOS
D ÉDER MILITÃO
D CAIO HENRIQUE
MF ESTÊVÃO
MF BRUNO GUIMARÃES
MF CASEMIRO
MF ENDRICK
F RAPHINHA
F VINÍCIUS JÚNIOR

At center back, Marquinhos and Éder Militão offer genuine quality—both have won major European honors and understand the demands of knockout football. The concern isn't individual quality; it's the system around them. Without fullbacks who can genuinely threaten in the final third, Brazil's shape risks becoming too narrow and predictable. Opposing coaches will quickly identify that width has to come from elsewhere—likely from the front three—which compresses the attacking options Ancelotti needs to keep defenses honest.

GOALKEEPER

The goalkeeping situation is one area where Brazil can exhale. Alisson starts, full stop. Barring injury, he remains among the finest keepers on the planet and his place is unchallenged. Behind him, Neto has thrived at Al-Nassr (Saudi Arabia). Ederson, after making the move from Manchester City to Fenerbahçe (Turkey), hit the ground running with 11 clean sheets across all competitions. Those three represent a formidable depth chart.

OFF THE BENCH

The Brazil bench doesn't carry the kind of names that send opposing coaches scrambling to their whiteboards. Endrick is the most compelling wild card here. His loan move to Lyon breathed new life into a career that had gone flat under the bright lights of Real Madrid. He is running, scoring, and smiling again, recapturing the fearless edge he showed at Palmeiras. That evolution matters. It suggests that given time and rhythm at the club level, Endrick can translate his confidence into meaningful contributions for Ancelotti off the bench when Brazil needs a spark.

COACH AND STYLE

Carlo Ancelotti is living his best life in Brazil. Between beer commercials and guest appearances at Carnival in Rio and Bahía, he has planted his flag firmly in South American soil—signing a contract extension through 2030. On the touchline, he brings the same philosophy that defined his European success: pragmatic, player-centered, and unfailingly calm. He adapts formations—typically a 4-3-3 or 4-4-2 to fit the players rather than forcing players into a rigid system. His greatest asset isn't tactical brilliance; it's emotional intelligence. He reads rooms, manages egos, earns loyalty, and knows precisely when to trust his players' instincts over his own impulses. His teams defend with discipline and attack with fluidity, transitioning quickly and punishing space ruthlessly.

MARQUINHOS

MATCH DAYS

GAME 1
- → Saturday, June 13 vs. Morocco
- → MetLife Stadium, New York/New Jersey
- → 6 pm ET

GAME 2
- → Friday, June 19 vs. Haiti
- → Lincoln Financial Field, Philadelphia
- → 9 pm ET

GAME 3
- → Wednesday, June 24 vs. Scotland
- → Hard Rock Stadium, Miami
- → 6 pm ET

WHAT TO EXPECT

"There is power and authority in being calm and measured, in building trust and making decisions coolly, in using influence and persuasion and in being professional in your approach." That's what Ancelotti wrote in his book, *Quiet Leadership: Winning Hearts, Minds and Matches*. Those words will be tested like never before. Managing Brazil means managing a nation's obsession—a country where football isn't sport, it's identity, and the weight of 200 million expectations lands squarely on one Italian's shoulders. Ancelotti has shown he understands the assignment—his handling of Neymar showed he would not be stampeded by public pressure. He knows the stakes: if Brazil fail without Neymar, the narrative writes itself. If they fail with him, four years of rebuilding lie ahead.

RICARDO NOGUEIRA/SPORTS PRESS PHOTO/GETTY IMAGES

BELGIUM

2026 WORLD CUP PREDICTION
ROUND OF 16

CAPITAL: BRUSSELS • POP: 11.8 MILLION • SOCCER = VOETBAL • FIRST WORLD CUP: 1930 • NATIONAL TEAM NICKNAME: DE RODE DUIVELS

GROUP G

Belgians rarely all agree on one thing, but on this they will: the era of the national team's "Golden Generation" has come and gone. That refers to the corps of players who were seemingly destined to lead the team to great heights . . . but never quite achieved what was expected. Some of its biggest names will still be involved when the *Rode Duivels* start their World Cup campaign in Seattle on June 15: Thibaut Courtois (who will be 34), Kevin De Bruyne (turns 35 June 28), Romelu Lukaku (33), and the eternal Axel Witsel (37). All four were guaranteed starters in the 2014 World Cup, when they fell to future finalists Argentina in the quarterfinals. The same group of players came closest to a major title in the 2018 WC, where they finished third. Now, 2026 will be about transition. After the huge disappointment of Qatar 2022 (which they exited at the group stage), new faces were needed and were found. This group of young players has yet to be tested against top opposition, but will arrive in the USA on the back of a promising 2025 and unburdened by the expectations that their predecessors could not cope with in the end.

WORLD CUP APPEARANCES 15 | **WORLD CUP CHAMPIONSHIPS 0**

KEVIN DE BRUYNE

DEAN MOUHTAROPOULOS/GETTY IMAGES

FORWARDS

Belgium have one of the great goalscorers of this age in Lukaku—89 goals in 124 internationals at the start of 2026. But how fit will "Rom" be? His 2025–26 season only started in late January. He had taken part in just five of Belgium's last 16 matches at that point in time. Manager Rudi Garcia must plan for scenarios in which he has no target man to aim for, as none of the alternative number 9s—Loïs Openda, going through a rough patch at Juventus; the very promising 21-year-old Romeo Vermant; or the veteran Michy Batshuayi—can do it as "Rom" can. Whoever is at the tip of Belgium's attack will count on the service of two out-and-out wingers, (Premier League) Arsenal's Leandro Trossard on the right and Manchester City's Jérémy Doku on the left. Both have been enjoying terrific seasons with their clubs—though some Belgian fans will argue that they haven't shown quite the same success with the national team.

MIDFIELD

Garcia has switched his team's formation from 4-3-3 to 4-2-3-1 and back on several occasions in his short tenure, but which players feature in his midfield has not been determined by the chosen formation. Should he be fit, De Bruyne,

though fading, remains an automatic choice and will be given license to support his attackers, while either Nicolas Raskin or Amadou Onana will play alongside Youri Tielemans, who appears to thrive on the captaincy which Garcia gave him for good in September 2025. With everyone fit and focused, on paper, it is a model of balance and not short on creativity, though the connection between the two playmakers, De Bruyne and Tielemans, is not always what it could be. Remarkably, Witsel, already once-retired, a footballer who has the knack to control midfield without seeming to do anything of note, could be there to add to his 134 caps.

DEFENSE

Belgium spent most of the last four years wondering how they would replace the famed Toby Alderweireld/Jan Vertonghen partnership that stood at the heart of their defense for 106 internationals. Vertonghen held on until the 2024 Euro, when he was 37. Since the duo retired, numerous combinations were tried and found wanting. Then, Garcia might have stumbled upon the back four that previous managers Roberto Martinez and Domenico Tedesco had been looking for in vain. The Frenchman paired the 6'3" Zeno Debast with Arthur Theate in the middle, with Maxim De Cuyper on the left and either of the old-timers Thomas Meunier and Timothy Castagne on the right (both can switch flanks if needed). This combination has only been fielded on a handful of occasions over the last calendar year, but showed enough promise to suggest Belgium might have found a solution to its most pressing problem at last. How this defense will fare against tougher opposition is anyone's guess, however.

THIBAUT COURTOIS

JOSE BRETON/PICS ACTION/NURPHOTO VIA GETTY IMAGES

KEY TO THE CUP

The man who makes Belgium tick is Aston Villa's Youri Tielemans, a complete midfielder who can tackle, intercept, and pass, long and short, with both feet, and who has also developed a taste for goals in the last couple of years, with seven of them (only one a penalty kick) coming in his last 15 appearances for Belgium (through March). If Captain Youri is in tune, the whole team will sing.

PROJECTED STARTING XI

G	THIBAUT COURTOIS
D	MAXIM DE CUYPER
D	ARTHUR THEATE
D	ZENO DEBAST
D	THOMAS MEUNIER
MF	NICOLAS RASKIN
MF	YOURI TIELEMANS
MF	KEVIN DE BRUYNE
F	LEANDRO TROSSARD
F	ROMELU LUKAKU
F	JÉRÉMY DOKU

GOALKEEPER

The 6'7" Courtois is Garcia's first name on the match list in more ways than one. A match-winner for both Real Madrid and his country, Courtois continues to produce saves that dumbfound opposition and commentators alike. His wingspan of almost seven feet is unmatched in international football, and his spring and his athleticism enable him to claim aerial balls which other keepers would leave well alone. Few are better than he is in one-versus-one situations, in which he very rarely concedes penalties (which he's also made a habit of stopping later in his career). One of the best? Absolutely. The best? Not a bad call. The only real question mark concerns his fitness: Courtois has been plagued by a variety of injuries since the spring of 2023, which have caused him to miss most of Belgium's games in that period. Fortunately for Garcia, Courtois has two decent deputies playing in the Premier League, Matz Sels of Nottingham Forest and Manchester United starter Senne Lammens. Both keepers may not exude the same authority as Courtois, but both players would start for many other national teams.

JEREMY DOKU

OFF THE BENCH

The Belgian squad's depth is all the more impressive given that its population is only a fifth or so of France's or England's. Garcia has some terrific options to use from the bench in attack, such as Openda, AC Milan winger Alexis Saelemaekers (a direct competitor of Trossard who can also play at right back and right wingback), and the silky Charles De Ketelaere, who can be asked a fill a variety of roles, including false 9, second striker, and number 10—as can the Club Brugge (Belgium) legend Hans Vanaken. The second-string defenders might not be quite of the same standard as the incumbents, but there too, Garcia has decent cover in Brandon Mechele, Koni De Winter, and Wout Faes.

COACH AND STYLE

Garcia had to wait until his 60th year for his first taste of international football but found his marks quickly after a delicate first few months in his job. Though he does not have a distinctive "style" as such, he is a pragmatist who will adapt to the nature of the opposition. His insistence on adhering to certain principles, such as imposing a high, hard press from kickoff, has already borne fruit: his Belgian team passes the ball and plays through the lines more quickly and is markedly more aggressive with and without the ball than under Tedesco and Martinez. The improvement has been visible on the pitch, where Belgium—without Lukaku—was unbeaten in World Cup qualifying and staved off relegation in the UEFA Nations League. In the stands, the fans have noisily reconnected with their team as well, while the team's dressing-room atmosphere hasn't been this good for years.

MATCH DAYS

GAME 1
- → Monday, June 15
- → vs. Egypt
- → Lumen Field, Seattle
- → 3 pm ET

GAME 2
- → Sunday, June 21
- → vs. Iran
- → SoFi Stadium, Los Angeles
- → 3 pm ET

GAME 3
- → Friday, June 26
- → vs. New Zealand
- → BC Place, Vancouver
- → 11 pm ET

WHAT TO EXPECT

The draw was as kind as it could be for Belgium, where Egypt, Iran, and New Zealand are not expected to prevent Garcia's team to progress as winners of Group G. After that, they may get the USA in the Round of 16. Should the Belgians prevail, things should get much tougher, with World Cup favorites Spain lurking in the quarterfinals. Spain last lost against the Duivels in. . . 1986. This time around, no one is giving Belgium a chance to go the whole way, which might play to their advantage. A quarterfinal spot would make for an honorable show, and provide Garcia with a springboard to aim higher at Euro 2028 and beyond.

CRYSTAL PIX/MB MEDIA/GETTY IMAGES

GERMANY

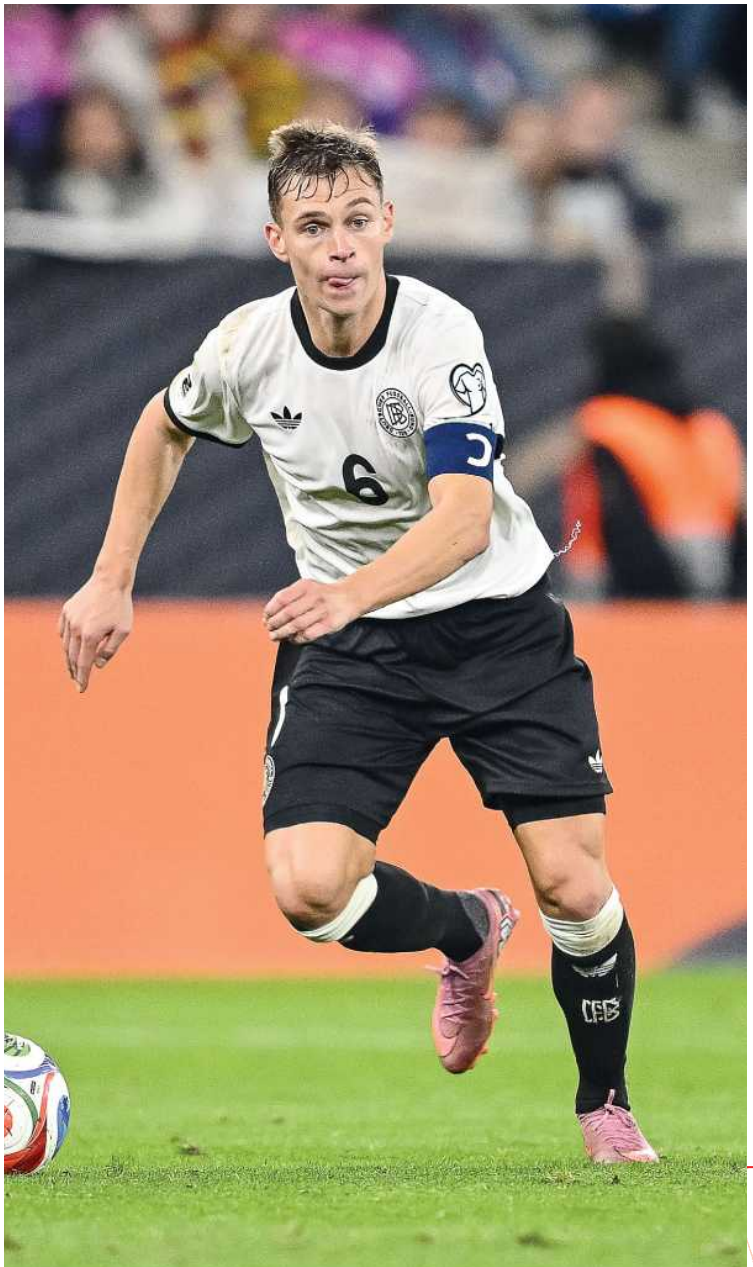
2026 WORLD CUP PREDICTION
ROUND OF 16

CAPITAL: BERLIN • POP: 83.4 MILLION • SOCCER = FUSSBALL • FIRST WORLD CUP: 1934 • NATIONAL TEAM NICKNAME: NATIONALELF

The World Cup used to mean the same old routine of Germany either winning the whole thing or coming very close, with a total of 12 top-three finishes easily besting any other nation (Brazil is next, with 9).

But times have changed, and consecutive group-stage exits in 2018 and 2022—along with the retirement of stalwarts such as Thomas Müller, Manuel Neuer, and Toni Kroos—have left the team entering this year's edition with expectations significantly lowered, especially with preparations overshadowed by injuries to several key players.

Nevertheless, Germany remains among the world's most competitive footballing nations, and the largely untroubled progress made by manager Julian Nagelsmann's men through qualification (five wins, one defeat, 16 goals scored, and three conceded) suggests this transitional team could pose a major threat. In particular, a 6-0 thrashing of Slovakia in November to finish the qualification phase was a tantalizing sign of how far this group of players could go. Far bigger tests lie ahead but, if the injury list stays clear, a potentially tricky group stage is navigated, and momentum starts to build, opponents underestimate Germany at their peril.



HARRY LANGER/DEFODI IMAGES/DEFODI VIA GETTY IMAGES; OPPOSITE: RALF IBING - FIRO SPORTPHOTO/GETTY IMAGES

WORLD CUP APPEARANCES 21 | **WORLD CUP CHAMPIONSHIPS** 4

JOSHUA KIMMICH

FORWARDS

The lack of a world-class goalscorer could be the squad's biggest weakness, not helped by Borussia Mönchengladbach captain Tim Kleindienst battling serious knee injuries, which have cast major doubt over his availability. In his potential absence, the responsibility of leading the line would fall to the giant figure of Nick Woltemade, who did not make his international debut until June 2025 but then started all six qualifying games, during which he produced a decent return of four goals. But the 6'6" target man still looks like a work in progress—he was often more miss than hit during his first Premier League season with Newcastle United, and Nagelsmann will be crossing his fingers that Kleindienst recovers enough fitness to provide a compelling alternative. If not, veteran Niclas Füllkrug could be the backup option despite his less-than-impressive recent club form.

There are also injury worries over the team's first-choice support striker, with Kai Havertz, who was not back on regular time with Arsenl (Premier League) until February. The 27-year-old did not feature at all during the qualifying stage, and Nagelsmann's preparations for the summer have been further disrupted by a similarly injury-hit club campaign for Jamal Musiala, another strong and versatile option if he can return to full fitness.

Two more key figures in the attacking third are Serge Gnabry and Leroy Sané, both of whom offer the skillset to operate either in wide positions or roam through the middle. With more than 130 international appearances between them, this pair of 30-year-olds will be expected to bear an even greater share of the goalscoring burden.

MIDFIELD

Whereas many of Nagelsmann's plans are shrouded in mystery due to a combination of concerns over fitness, form, and inexperience, there's no doubting his preferred trio in the midfield engine room: Bayern Munich duo Joshua Kimmich and Leon Goretzka, and Liverpool (Premier League) playmaker Florian Wirtz. Kimmich, in particular, is the team's captain and leader on the field, and heads into this World Cup as one of the tournament's most experienced players. With more than 100 caps and every possible club honor under his belt, the 31-year-old can be relied upon to calmly navigate challenging periods of play, guiding his team with astute passing and an ice-cool temperament.

It certainly helps that the man alongside him in the center of the field, Goretzka, has been his club teammate at Bayern in Germany for eight years. Their telepathic understanding gives a sense of structure and continuity to a team that is otherwise beset by uncertainties, and their importance to Germany's quest for glory cannot be overstated.

In front of them, the team's creative reins are controlled by Wirtz—the most expensive German footballer in history following his $145 million move from Bayer Leverkusen (Germany) to Liverpool last summer. His first season in English football has been challenging, but there's no questioning Wirtz's technical prowess, allowing him to create and score goals in equal measure.

One caveat: injuries (yes, more of them) forced Nagelsmann to occasionally field Kimmich at right back during the qualifiers, with Aleksandar Pavlovic—another Bayern man—taking his usual place in midfield. But that was an emergency measure which Nagelsmann will not want to repeat, because the central axis of Kimmich, Goretzka and Wirtz should be his team's greatest strength.

FLORIAN WIRTZ

PROJECTED STARTING XI

GK	OLIVER BAUMANN
D	RIDLE BAKU
D	JONATHAN TAH
D	ANTONIO RÜDIGER
D	DAVID RAUM
MF	LEON GORETZKA
MF	JOSHUA KIMMICH
MF	FLORIAN WIRTZ
F	JAMAL MUSIALA
F	NICK WOLTEMADE
F	SERGE GNABRY

KEY TO THE CUP

Who will be fit to perform at their peak during June and July? If the likes of Havertz and Musiala can get themselves physically ready, Germany's chances of mounting a major challenge will look much more promising. Otherwise, it's a somewhat untested squad lacking quality depth in many areas, and the demands of tournament football could become too much for a small core of tried and trusted performers.

DEFENSE

The makeup of the back four is unclear and likely inexperienced, with powerhouse center back Antonio Rüdiger the only defensive option possessing more than 50 caps—and even his place is far from guaranteed after a mixed season at Real Madrid.

One player looking like a certain pick is the imposing Jonathan Tah, who made his first international appearance way back in 2016 but didn't become a regular until two years ago. The 6'5" center back has thrived since joining Bayern Munich from Bayer Leverkusen last summer, offering leadership skills and a sense of authority that will be badly needed in a developing defensive line.

Tah should be accompanied by either Rüdiger or Nico Schlotterbeck, a strong tackler who has been on the periphery of the squad for a few years and now—with the aging Rüdiger apparently in decline—looks poised to make the position his own.

On the left, Germany can also count on the steady presence of RB Leipzig (Germany) captain David Raum, who played in all six qualification matches and showed his ability to contribute to the attack by providing a couple of assists. But the identity of the right back is open to debate: Nnamdi Collins, Waldemar Anton, Ridle Baku, and Kimmich all filled the role during the qualifiers, and each of them could feasibly be the final selection this summer.

GOALKEEPER

Germany's first-choice keeper should be Marc-André ter Stegen but, following a familiar theme in this squad, the veteran's participation is in doubt after a wretched campaign which saw him get sidelined by injury, lose his starting spot at Barcelona, move to Girona in search of regular football, and then suffer another injury. In his absence, Oliver Baumann has stepped in manfully, raising the question of whether ter Stegen should play even if he regains fitness. Baumann is a surprise late bloomer, finally earning his first international cap in October 2024, at the age of 34. He subsequently played every minute during World Cup qualifying.

OFF THE BENCH

Nagelsmann could spring a surprise by unleashing exciting attacking midfielder Lennart Karl, who has exploded onto the scene with Bayern Munich over the last few months. The 18-year-old became the youngest ever player to score in three consecutive UEFA Champions League matches, and looks set to become the future face of *Die Nationalelf*—the only question is exactly when that future will arrive. Veteran forward Deniz Undav has enjoyed the best season of his career with Stuttgart (Germany), and could become another impact sub.

COACH AND STYLE

Nagelsmann has been in charge for three years, but his World Cup preparations have been surrounded by speculation that he could become the next Manchester United manager. That reflects his widely admired status as a proponent of modern, fast-paced, and high-energy football, based on a 4-2-3-1 formation but giving attacking players plenty of freedom to interchange positions.

KAI HAVERTZ

GEERT VAN ERVEN/SOCCRATES/GETTY IMAGES

MATCH DAYS

GAME 1
- → Sunday, June 14 vs. Curaçao
- → NRG Stadium, Houston
- → 1 pm ET

GAME 2
- → Saturday, June 20 vs. Ivory Coast
- → Toronto Stadium, Toronto
- → 4 pm ET

GAME 3
- → Thursday, June 25 vs. Ecuador
- → MetLife Stadium, New York/New Jersey
- → 4 pm ET

WHAT TO EXPECT

An opener against minnows Curaçao needs to yield three easy points, because the subsequent group games against Ivory Coast and Ecuador are both real potential banana skins. If successful, winning a tough group after long journeys between Houston, Toronto, and New Jersey could then send Germany on course for a likely quarterfinals matchup with France, and that may prove the end of the road for Nagelsmann's men.

CROATIA

2026 WORLD CUP PREDICTION
ROUND OF 32

CAPITAL: ZAGREB • POP: 3.8 MILLION • SOCCER = NOGOMET • FIRST WORLD CUP: 1998 • NATIONAL TEAM NICKNAME: VATRENI

GROUP L

Croatia arrive at the 2026 World Cup in a familiar place, somewhere between what they were and what they are trying to become. You can see it in the way veteran midfield superstar Luka Modric adjusts his body before receiving a pass or in the way the group collectively slows a match down to a rhythm only they understand. But this is no longer the Croatia built on the backs of Champions League winners across Europe. Those days are gone. The squad is older and with less depth, and the gap between starters and substitutes is wider than ever.

Even so, Croatia remain Croatia. They control games better than most, keeping more than 70 percent possession across qualifying. They conceded just four goals in eight matches, showing a style built on calm control, patience, and an unshakable belief that if they survive just long enough, their chance will eventually come. And it usually does. In a way, they are still the same side that built deep tournament runs out of grit and repetition. They simply do it now with less raw talent and more muscle memory.

FORWARDS

The front line is a blend of experience, subtle brilliance, and physical perseverance. Andrej Kramaric remains the cleanest finisher in the squad, with six goals in qualifying. His movement is clever, shaped by experience rather than athleticism. He arrives in the box at the right moment, with the right body shape, and finishes in the same unhurried way he always has.

But even with that said, Ivan Perisic is still the heartbeat of Croatia's attack. He is 37 now and notably slower, less explosive, but somehow even more decisive. His eight goal contributions in qualifying make him the most productive Croatian attacker by some margin. But even more importantly, he creates more chances than anyone else in the team: 10 big chances and 22 overall in pre-World Cup matches. Despite his age, he still presses, still runs, still carries the ball into dangerous spaces. Croatia's overall lack of speed is softened by both his intelligence and an incomprehensible athleticism for a forward of his years.

Ante Budimir, on the other hand, provides the brawn and reliability needed to complement the tandem of Kramaric and Perisic and is the final cog in this

WORLD CUP APPEARANCES **7** | WORLD CUP CHAMPIONSHIPS **0**

LUKA MODRIC

DAMJAN ZIBERT /SOCCRATES/GETTY IMAGES

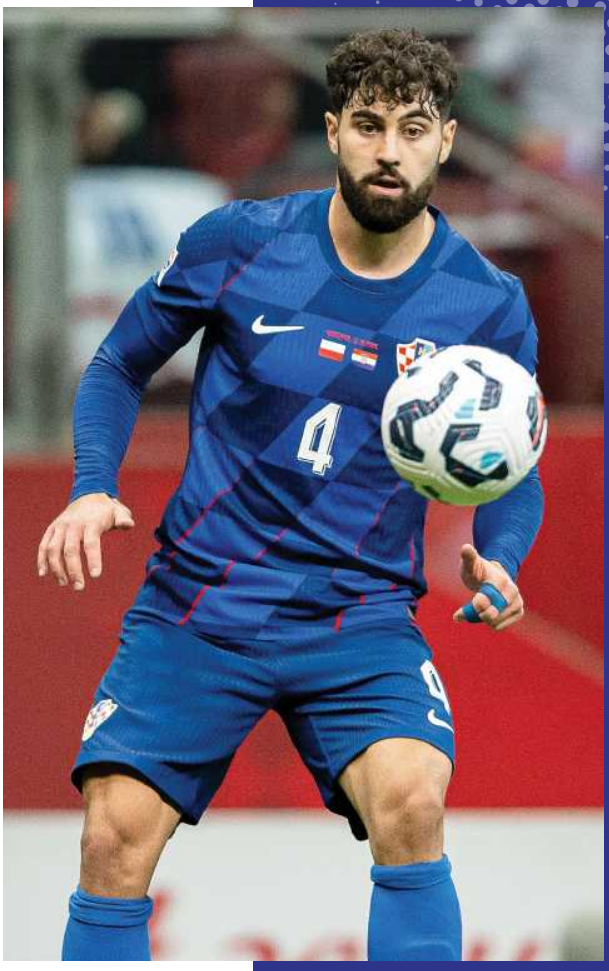
team's attacking machinery. Budimir's finishing can fluctuate, but he keeps Croatia high up the pitch with his hold-up play. Croatia's attack lacks speed and urgency but makes up for it with patience and old-fashioned grit.

MIDFIELD

Everything Croatia does begins and ends with their midfield. And even now, with less star power than in previous cycles, it remains their most recognizable unit. Modric still conducts the match, completing over 80 passes per game and hitting long diagonals that stretch the pitch and breathe whatever life they can into attacks.

Petar Sucic very much represents the next generation in Croatia's pipeline. On the face of it, he offers balance, defensive control, and nearly 70 passes per match. But when you dig deeper, you realize he also covers space proactively, allowing Modric to conserve energy for the moments when the match demands subtlety rather than running. Mateo Kovacic, when and if healthy, gives Croatia their only true ball-carrying threat. When he is absent, which may very well be the case due to injuries, their midfield loses those extra 10 meters of progression and their transitions slow down noticeably.

Nikola Moro adds stability with his crisp distribution, especially his long passing. Meanwhile, Martin Baturina and Toni Fruk offer creativity and risk. They will not start every match, but their ability to inject unpredictability could prove valuable when Croatia find themselves stuck against compact opponents. And they will.



JOSKO GVARDIOL

MATEUSZ SLODKOWSKI/GETTY IMAGES

KEY TO THE CUP

Croatia's key to reaching the latter stages lies in maintaining control and protecting their spine. They must keep the ball, keep the match slow, and avoid being pulled into transition-heavy games. Fitness plays a part, too. Losing Gvardiol or Kovacic to injury would mean the lineup simply becomes weaker. Fortunately, their knockout expertise, as evidenced by their last few heroic runs in World Cup play, still shines. When they do not have to chase matches, they become a problem for anyone. In fact, in most cases, they are a problem for almost anyone.

DEFENDERS

The defensive line is Croatia's most balanced unit but unfortunately for manager Zlatko Dalić and his team, it also comes with serious question marks that still need answering. Josko Gvardiol remains the standout, of course. A standout with Manchester City in the Premier League, he is a modern defender with anticipation, timing, and the passing range to break pressure. Gvardiol's long balls are among the most accurate in the squad. However, the national team still doesn't know if he'll recover from a January leg injury in time to give his team a much-needed boost.

In central defense, Josip Sutalo supports Gvardiol with strong interception numbers and a confident reading of danger. Together, and in an ideal scenario, they form the foundation that allows Croatia to defend higher than their (lack of) pace might suggest.

PROJECTED STARTING XI

GK	DOMINIK LIVAKOVIC
D	JOSIP STANISIC
D	JOSIP SUTALO
D	DUJE CALETA-CAR
D	JOSKO GVARDIOL
MF	PETAR SUCIC
MF	LUKA MODRIC
MF	MATEO KOVACIC
F	ANDREJ KRAMARIC
F	ANTE BUDIMIR
F	IVAN PERISIC

Duje Caleta-Car provides the raw penalty-box defending Croatia often need, clearing more than any other defender. His starting position, however, is also not guaranteed and may be usurped by Luka Vuskovic, should Dalic choose to trust youth and form over experience and hierarchy.

Josip Stanisic continues to grow into one of the squad's most important pieces. He defends smartly, steps into midfield when needed, and contributes creatively from deep, producing multiple dangerous passes into the box during qualifying. But he's also been struggling with niggling injuries. If fit and if Gvardiol is a no-show, he might slot into that left back slot, too.

GOALKEEPER

Dominik Livakovic used to be Croatia's most reliable performer. His presence was steady and calculated, resulting in Croatia conceding just half a goal per game in qualifying. On top of that, with a high save percentage and more than a goal prevented beyond expectation, he should inject some confidence in this aging but still capable team. However, both his inconsistent playing time and the fact he is not the most aggressive distributor could sow some doubt. Fortunately, his main role is to be calm and steady, not sweep or distribute excessively. And when on form, he delivers exactly that. If Croatia are forced to weather long stretches defensively, and they will be, they will look to Livakovic to be their anchor.

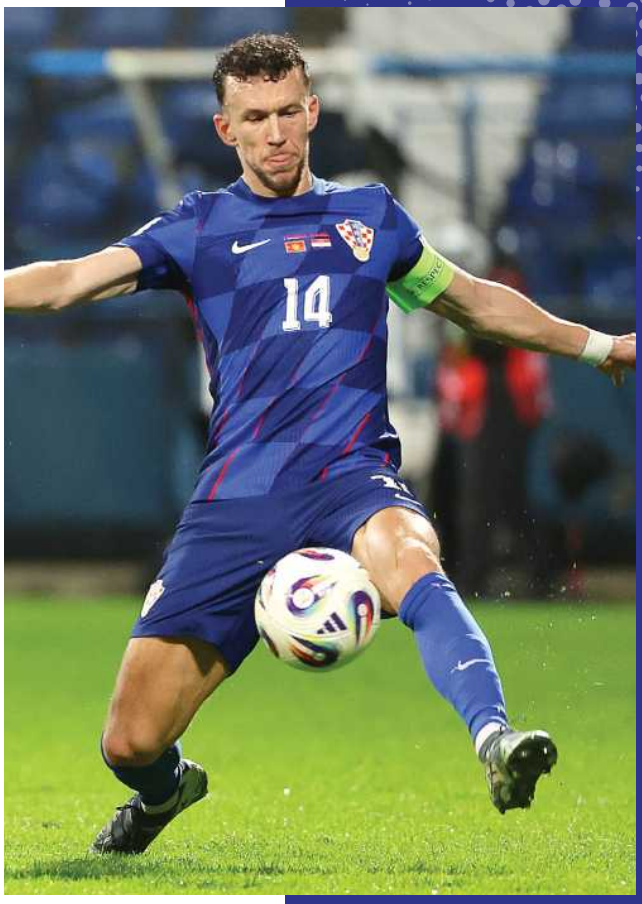
OFF THE BENCH

This is where Croatia begin to wobble. Outside of the starting XI the options thin out quickly, as the gap between starting material and depth has never been bigger. That said, with emerging talents like Vuskovic and midfielder Martin Baturina, they have added some much-needed fresh blood to the team. The next step, however, is to actually use them.

COACH AND STYLE

Dalić leads Croatia with a philosophy shaped by loyalty and collective belief. His style is not built on tactical innovation but on cohesion and calm. His teams keep possession, create controlled phases of play, and rely on experience to carry them through difficult moments. Croatia's mark of nearly 90 percent pass accuracy in qualifiers shows how committed they are to avoiding chaos.

Dalić's approach is built on two main principles: trust the pillars and protect the structure. He counts on Modric, Perisic, Kramaric, and Kovacic because they form the emotional foundation of the team. But this stability (or stubbornness) also slows their (lack of) evolution; generational change is overdue but continually delayed. Will it come back to haunt them?



IVAN PERISIC

FRANCESCO SCACCIANOCE - UEFA/UEFA VIA GETTY IMAGES)

MATCH DAYS

GAME 1	GAME 2	GAME 3
→ Wednesday, June 17 vs. England	→ Tuesday, June 23 vs. Panama	→ Saturday, June 27 vs. Ghana
→ AT&T Stadium, Dallas	→ BMO Field, Toronto	→ Lincoln Financial Field, Philadelphia
→ 4 pm ET	→ 7 pm ET	→ 5 pm ET

WHAT TO EXPECT

Croatia will be a difficult opponent for anyone, that's a given. However, there's no escaping the fact that they lack the talent to target another medal run, even if they absolutely have enough to knock someone out along the way. If the veterans stay healthy, a Round of 16 or quarterfinal run is well within reach. The team will have to absorb difficult stretches, stay organized, and wait for the right moment. But compared to Russia 2018 and Qatar 2022, the dropoff in individual quality for this World Cup is painfully obvious.

MOROCCO

2026 WORLD CUP PREDICTION
QUARTERFINAL

CAPITAL: RABAT • POP: 37.1 MILLION • SOCCER = KURAT AL-QADAM • FIRST WORLD CUP: 1970 • NATIONAL TEAM NICKNAME: ATLAS LIONS

Few teams have reshaped global perceptions of African football in the way that Morocco did during the 2022 World Cup. Their historic run to the semifinals was not simply an emotional underdog story that captured global imagination for a few weeks. It was the culmination of a carefully built football project—one that combined long-term infrastructure investment, diaspora scouting, youth development, and a modern tactical philosophy.

In Qatar, victories over Belgium, Spain, and Portugal proved that Morocco were not surviving on momentum alone. They were executing a system built on defensive structure, collective responsibility, and explosive transitions.

Heading into the 2026 World Cup, Morocco face a very different psychological landscape. The surprise factor that once worked in their favor is gone. Opponents now prepare for Morocco with full awareness of their tactical discipline and competitive mentality. In many ways, Morocco is no longer an outsider looking to shock the world. They are no longer simply one of Africa's most talented teams, but a proven global competitor.

Equally important is the emotional connection between the team and its supporters. Moroccan fans have become famous for creating extraordinary atmospheres wherever the team plays. Their presence transforms stadiums into vibrant displays of national pride, energizing the players and amplifying the sense of occasion. Can they get the same support in the United States?

ALEX GRIMM - FIFA/FIFA VIA GETTY IMAGES; OPPOSITE: JOSE BRETON/PICS ACTION/NURPHOTO VIA GETTY IMAGES

WORLD CUP APPEARANCES 7 | **WORLD CUP CHAMPIONSHIPS** 0

ACHRAF HAKIMI

FORWARDS

In the attacking third, Morocco's creative responsibility increasingly revolves around Brahim Díaz of Real Madrid. Díaz emerged as Morocco's standout performer during the 2025 Africa Cup of Nations, delivering one of the tournament's most influential individual campaigns. Operating between midfield and attack, Díaz displayed exceptional creativity and composure. His five goals in seven matches played a decisive role in guiding Morocco all the way to the title. Time and again, he produced moments of inspiration when the team needed a breakthrough.

On the opposite flank, Abde Ezzalzouli offers a completely different attacking profile. Playing for Real Betis (Spain), Ezzalzouli is known for his explosive acceleration and fearless dribbling. He thrives in one-on-one situations, regularly isolating defenders and creating opportunities through direct attacking play.

The striker position presents Morocco with several credible options. Youssef En-Nesyri remains one of the most recognizable names in the role. His aerial ability, physical strength, and experience at major tournaments make him a constant threat inside the penalty area. Alongside him, Ayoub El Kaabi offers a different type of striker profile. El Kaabi is known for his intelligent movement and instinctive finishing, often finding space in crowded penalty areas where defenders lose track of him.

MIDFIELD

Sofyan Amrabat remains the tactical anchor of the team. His ability to read the game, anticipate danger, and recover possession gives Morocco stability in front of the defense. Amrabat's passing may not always be spectacular, but it is consistently efficient, helping Morocco transition smoothly from defensive phases into controlled build-up play.

Next to him, Azzedine Ounahi provides an entirely different dimension. Ounahi's agility, creativity, and ability to carry the ball through midfield allow Morocco to break defensive lines with speed and unpredictability. During the previous World Cup, his performances attracted global attention as he repeatedly evaded pressure with footwork and movement.

The contrast between Amrabat's defensive intelligence and Ounahi's attacking energy gives Morocco a balanced midfield capable of adapting to different tactical situations.

DEFENSE

One of the defining elements of Morocco's new(ish) identity is the influence of fullback Achraf Hakimi. Few fullbacks in modern football impact games the way Hakimi does. His role within Morocco's tactical structure extends far beyond defensive duties. When Morocco transition from defense to attack, Hakimi frequently becomes the primary outlet, surging forward with explosive pace and intelligent movement.

His overlapping runs stretch opposition defenses and create vital space for Morocco's attacking players. At the same time, his elite recovery speed ensures that the team rarely becomes vulnerable when he commits forward. Hakimi's presence effectively allows Morocco to attack with greater width and dynamism while maintaining defensive balance.

In central defense, Morocco are entering a slightly new phase following the recent international retirement of Romain Saïss. The responsibility now shifts more clearly toward Nayef Aguerd, a defender who has steadily developed into one of Africa's most reliable central defenders. Aguerd combines aerial authority

NOUSSAIR MAZRAOUI

KEY TO THE CUP

Success hinges on the creative influence of Brahim Díaz and the attacking unpredictability of Abde Ezzalzouli. Both players possess the technical ability and confidence to unlock tight defenses, something Morocco occasionally struggled with against well-organized opponents. The question is whether Morocco can consistently translate their defensive discipline into attacking efficiency. During the 2025 Africa Cup of Nations, Díaz showed he can carry the team creatively, but relying too heavily on one playmaker could make Morocco predictable against elite opposition.

PROJECTED STARTING XI

GK	YASSINE (BONO) BOUNOU
D	ACHRAF HAKIMI
D	NAYEF AGUERD
D	ADAM MASINA
D	NOUSSAIR MAZRAOUI
MF	SOFYAN AMRABAT
MF	ISMAEL SAIBARI
MF	BILAL EL KHANNOUSS
F	BRAHIM DÍAZ
F	AYOUB EL KAABI
F	ABDE EZZALZOULI

with calmness in possession, qualities that are essential for Morocco's structured defensive approach. Alongside him, Adam Masina has emerged as a dependable partner in central defense.

Their partnership proved effective because of its balance. Aguerd brought positional discipline and physical presence, while Masina offered mobility and comfort on the ball when stepping into midfield. Together they give Morocco one of the most organized defensive units of the tournament.

GOALKEEPER

Morocco is blessed with experience and size in the nets. Yassine "Bono" Bounou has been his country's No. 1 for years, piling up 87 caps while earning top-five spots in several world goalkeeper of the year races. He spent most of his pro career in Spain, and has been in goal for Morocco since 2013. Bono was a reserve at the 2018 World Cup, but starred in 2022, leading the tournament with four clean sheets. Now with Al-Hilal in the Saudi Pro League, he'll be a huge asset for Morocco again this summer. His backup is Munir Mohamedi, also making his third World Cup squad.

OFF THE BENCH

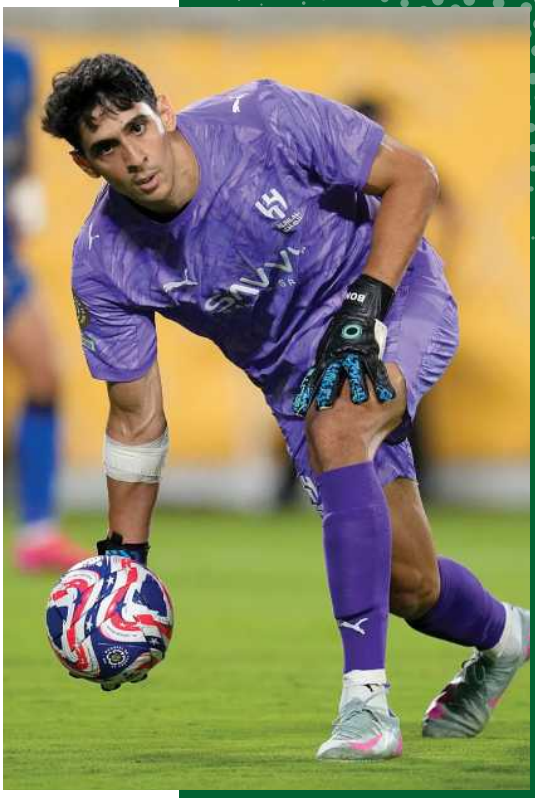
Beyond the starting eleven, Morocco benefit from one of the strongest talent pipelines in African football. Years of investment in youth development particularly through the Mohammed VI Football Academy have created a steady flow of technically refined players entering the national team setup. At striker, for instance, a younger option is Hamza Igamane, whose development has attracted increasing attention. Igamane represents the emerging generation of Moroccan forwards and provides pace, pressing energy, and tactical versatility.

COACH AND STYLE

A new managerial chapter has begun for the Morocco following the appointment of Mohamed Ouahbi as head coach in March. The 49-year-old tactician steps into the role after the departure of Walid Regragui, whose tenure delivered one of the most remarkable periods in Moroccan football history. Regragui helped establish a clear identity for the Atlas Lions, one built on compact defending, emotional unity, and rapid transitions. His ability to unite a diverse squad of domestic and diaspora players created a strong dressing-room culture as well.

Tactically, Ouahbi is known for flexibility. He frequently alternates between a 4-3-3 and a 3-4-3, systems designed to maximize width, control central spaces, and dictate the rhythm of matches. His philosophy places emphasis on structured possession and intelligent pressing, encouraging his teams to dominate territory while remaining compact when defending.

Ouahbi will continue the defensive solidity and collective spirit established during Regragui's era while gradually introducing a more progressive and possession-oriented style of play. If that balance can be achieved, Morocco could enter the next phase of their football evolution with renewed ambition and tactical versatility.



YASSINE BOUNOU

MATCH DAYS

GAME 1
- → Saturday, June 13 vs. Brazil
- → MetLife Stadium, New York/New Jersey
- → 6 pm ET

GAME 2
- → Friday, June 19 vs. Scotland
- → Gillette Stadium, Boston
- → 6 pm ET

GAME 3
- → Wednesday, June 24 vs. Haiti
- → Mercedes-Benz Stadium, Atlanta
- → 3 pm ET

WHAT TO EXPECT

After their historic semifinal run at the 2022 World Cup, Morocco is no longer viewed as an outsider capable of surprising the football world. They are now a proven competitor expected to challenge strong teams deep into the tournament. Much will depend on Morocco's ability to balance their traditional defensive discipline with greater attacking ambition. Wins over Scotland and Haiti are expected, so the matchup with Brazil will show just how far Morocco has come. If they can maintain their compact structure while improving efficiency in front of goal, Morocco have the tools to move well beyond the group stage.

JOSE BRETON/PICS ACTION/NURPHOTO VIA GETTY IMAGES

COLOMBIA

2026 WORLD CUP PREDICTION
ROUND OF 16

CAPITAL: BOGOTÁ • POP: 53.5 MILLION • SOCCER = FUTBOL • FIRST WORLD CUP: 1962 • NATIONAL TEAM NICKNAME: LOS CAFETEROS

GROUP K

Colombia returns to the World Cup riding a monumental wave of expectation—not merely to compete, but to seize the tournament by the throat. Some of the hype is earned; some is inflated. Either way, the players know they can thrive when the weight of that pressure is stripped away. The qualifying campaign was a reminder that this group is capable of both brilliance and self-sabotage in equal measure—a turbulent road that left scars not yet fully healed. That tension is precisely what makes them so fascinating: supporters dare to dream of deep runs while simultaneously bracing for the gut-punch of a shock exit. But manager Néstor Lorenzo has built something real here, and with the right combination of discipline and fortune, Colombia could command the tournament's brightest spotlights.

FORWARDS

Colombia's attack has the potential to be among the most devastating in the entire field—and one of the most volatile. The man leading the line is Luis Suárez, the Sporting Lisbon striker who emerged as the team's unexpected savior. When Colombia could not buy a goal and the demons of a previous cycle began circling again, Suárez materialized from relative obscurity and punched through the doubt. His lethal finishing and relentless consistency guided the team through one of their most turbulent qualifying stretches in memory. He is not a household name yet—but he is rapidly becoming one.

Questions persist beyond him. Jhon Córdoba has performed admirably with Krasnodar (Russia), and Rafael Santos Borré has clawed his way back to relevance after a difficult spell at Internacional. Jhon Durán, meanwhile, has become a cautionary tale. The former Aston Villa (Premier League) forward is now on his third club since leaving Villa Park in January 2025, currently stationed at Zenit St. Petersburg (Russia). The conversation around him has shifted—no longer about whether he belongs in the squad, but whether his career is on a path worth following at all.

Everything, however, flows through Luis Díaz. The Bayern Munich winger operates on a different plane when he is right, and right now, he is exceptional. His season unfolded like a telenovela—grief over the loss of a close friend, a

WORLD CUP APPEARANCES **7** | WORLD CUP CHAMPIONSHIPS **0**

JAMES RODRIGUEZ

JORDAN BANK/GETTY IMAGES

high-profile transfer, a torrent of summer criticism—before he silenced every detractor with blistering Bundesliga form. Liverpool's deterioration without him only amplified his legacy. Explosive, technically sublime, tactically intelligent: Díaz is the most dangerous player in his position on the planet, and Colombia's most lethal weapon.

MIDFIELD

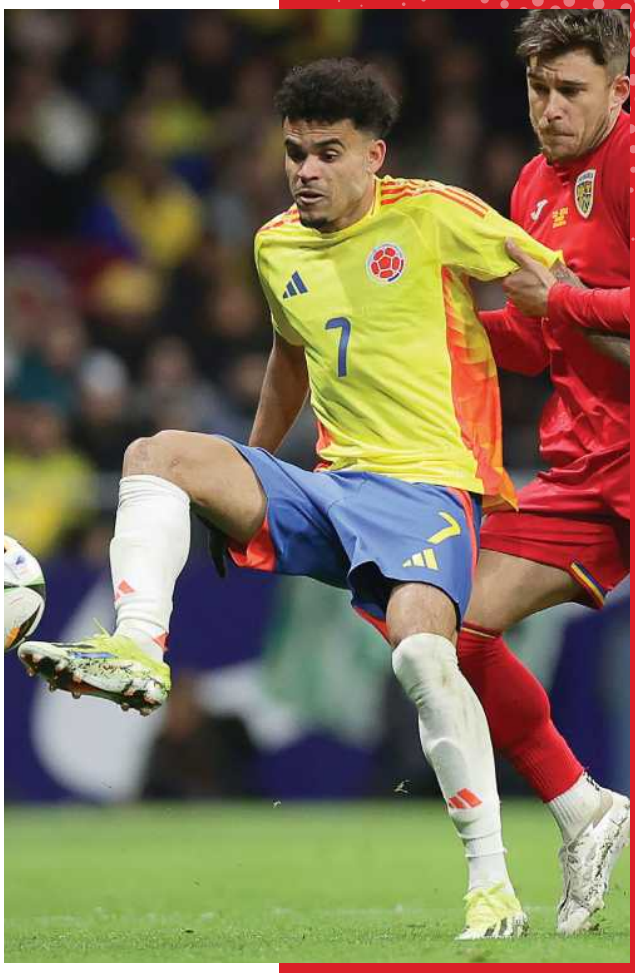
Work rate and flair collide beautifully in Colombia's midfield. Richard Ríos and Jefferson Lerma anchor the unit, a tandem that has matured into one of the most formidable central partnerships in South American football. Ríos, who arrived at Benfica from Palmeiras, is the World Cup's most compelling breakout candidate. Should circumstances align, he could replicate what Enzo Fernández did for Argentina in Qatar in 2022—using the World Cup as a launching pad to Europe's summit. The concern is his shoulder. Ríos has declined surgery to protect his Benfica season and his World Cup place, a calculated gamble that could unravel at any moment.

Then there is James Rodríguez—perennial puzzle, eternal romantic figure. His club career has been a litany of near-misses and misfits. His arrival at Minnesota United raises more questions than it answers: What condition will he arrive in? Will a short-term MLS contract suffice as preparation? Is this a farewell tour? At 34, everything is on the table. Yet James in yellow has always been a different animal. When the national team shirt goes on, something ignites.

If he falters, Lorenzo can turn to Jorge Carrascal of Flamengo (Brazil), who had a breakout 2025, or to Juan Fernando Quintero, who carries many of the same creative gifts as Rodríguez and has thrived at River Plate (Argentina). Kevin Castaño, after his spectacular flop as River's most expensive signing in history, remains a liability.

DEFENSE

Colombia's defensive spine is formidable—until it isn't. The occasional catastrophic lapse lurks beneath the solidity. At center back, Davinson Sánchez has rediscovered himself at Galatasaray, while Jhon Lucumí remains the defensive cornerstone at Bologna. Yerry Mina delivers aerial dominance but cannot resist the theatrical. Carlos Cuesta, commanding and technically precise, demonstrated his quality during his impressive stint at Vasco da Gama (Brazil).



LUIS DÍAZ

GONZALO ARROYO MORENO/GETTY IMAGES

KEY TO THE CUP

Luis Suárez is not merely a name—he is a force. He scored four goals against Venezuela in a 2025 qualifier, and is now among Europe's leading scorers this season for Sporting Lisbon. The Santa Marta native has provided exactly what Colombia needed: a reliable, clinical center forward who does not wilt under pressure. His form could be the difference between a quarterfinal exit and something far more significant.

PROJECTED STARTING XI

GK	CAMILO VARGAS
D	DANIEL MUÑOZ
D	DAVINSON SÁNCHEZ
D	JHON LUCUMÍ
D	JOHAN MOJICA
MF	RICHARD RIOS
MF	JEFFERSON LERMA
MF	JHON ARIAS
MF	JAMES RODRÍGUEZ
MF	LUIS DÍAZ
F	LUIS SUÁREZ

The fullback pairing of Daniel Muñoz and Johan Mojica is among the most consistent in this World Cup. Muñoz's stock soared as Crystal Palace (Premier League) captured both the FA Cup and Community Shield; Mojica, quietly excellent at Girona and now Mallorca, has been one of La Liga's most dependable operators at his position.

GOALKEEPER

The position is in transition, and not entirely by choice. David Ospina, long the totemic presence between Colombia's posts, is in his twilight—a legendary servant who cannot be expected to carry the load he once did. Camilo Vargas of Atlas (Mexico) has stepped into the role and acquitted himself with quiet authority, earning Lorenzo's trust through consistent club performances. He is not a name that will generate headlines, but that may be exactly what this squad needs: a goalkeeper who does his job without drama.

OFF THE BENCH

If Colombia intend to go deep, the bench must close the gap to the starters. That gap has been a persistent and frustrating weakness—one that Lorenzo has wrestled with throughout his tenure. His reluctance to substitute early, partly born of justified distrust in his reserves, has cost the team momentum in tight matches when fresh legs and a tactical jolt were desperately needed. The drop-off in quality between the first XI and those behind them remains too steep for a team with genuine ambitions. Lorenzo knows this. Whether he has solved it is another matter entirely. At a tournament where margins are razor-thin and knockout football shows no mercy, a weak bench is not merely an inconvenience—it is a structural vulnerability that opponents will eventually exploit.

COACH AND STYLE

When Lorenzo returned to Colombia, he brought with him the philosophical DNA of José Pékerman, Colombia's manager through 2018. Gone was the reactive, opponent-dependent approach; in its place, a progressive, attacking identity built on wing play, incisive passing, and aggressive pressing. Lorenzo wants his teams to dominate—to dictate terms rather than absorb them. He maintains defensive organization while encouraging creative freedom, pressing relentlessly to reclaim possession and then exploiting space through positional rotations that leave opponents scrambling. His man-management is equally sharp: he resurrected Rodríguez's international career and has skillfully woven youth and experience together. The results speak: a 28-game unbeaten run, a 2024 Copa América final, and victories over Brazil, Germany, and Uruguay along the way. Can he help Colombia put it all together in 2026?

GABRIEL APONTE/GETTY IMAGES

RICHARD RIOS

MATCH DAYS

GAME 1
- → Wednesday, June 17 vs. Uzbekistan
- → Estadio Azteca, Mexico City
- → 10 pm ET

GAME 2
- → Tuesday, June 23 vs. DR Congo
- → Estadio Akron, Guadalajara
- → 10 pm ET

GAME 3
- → Saturday, June 27 vs. Portugal
- → Hard Rock Stadium, Miami
- → 7:30 pm ET

WHAT TO EXPECT

Colombia playing its first two games in Mexico will be a spectacle—loud, colorful, and impossible to ignore. And their clash with Portugal in South Florida carries seismic potential, the kind of match where World Cup aspirations are either ignited or extinguished in 90 breathless minutes. Should things unravel—defensive errors at critical moments, creative players retreating into individualism, old ghosts surfacing under the white-hot pressure of a knockout fixture—an early exit is entirely conceivable. The most likely scenario, however, sits somewhere between catastrophe and coronation: Colombia will produce moments of jaw-dropping brilliance alongside maddening lapses. They will win admirers through style and shed them through inexplicable errors. Whatever the final outcome, they will make this World Cup more compelling, more dramatic, and more alive simply by participating. That, in itself, is a kind of gift.

MEXICO

2026 WORLD CUP PREDICTION
ROUND OF 16

CAPITAL: MEXICO CITY • POP: 134 MILLION • SOCCER = FUTBOL • FIRST WORLD CUP: 1930 • NATIONAL TEAM NICKNAME: EL TRI

El quinto partido—the fifth game of the World Cup—is somewhat of a Holy Grail in Mexico. The team advanced from group play in seven straight tournaments between 1994 and 2018 before faltering in the fourth game. In 2022, they couldn't even get that far.

The great irony of the 2026 World Cup is that El Tri might have their worst team in decades and their best shot at *el quinto partido*. That's because they're playing on home soil in a World Cup expanded to 48 teams, with a manageable group, and the possibility of facing a third-place finisher in the fourth game. The fifth game is now merely the round of 16 instead of the elusive quarterfinals.

The only times Mexico made it that far were also the only times it was a World Cup host, in 1970 and 1986. If El Tri wins their group, they would play the first five games in Mexico City or Guadalajara, all of which provide the additional advantage of elevation. If they are the group runner-up, the round of 32 would be at SoFi Stadium in Southern California and the round of 16 in Houston—both places where they historically have drawn partisan, passionate crowds. As many as four games could be at Estadio Azteca, where they've played seven times in previous World Cups and never lost, outscoring opponents 11-2.

Javier "El Vasco" Aguirre is back for a third tour as national coach, and things were humming along last summer, with Mexico beating their rivals, the United States, 2-1 in the CONCACAF Gold Cup final. But then El Tri went winless in the next seven matches, and the knives came out from a fickle fan base. They were booed, even jeered, off the field several times. Aguirre opted to play more friendlies in Mexico than past cash grabs in the US, but the fans haven't reciprocated the love. A bad result in the World Cup could trigger them again.

"It's sad to play at home and get booed, to hear people shout 'Vasco out' or yell [an expletive] at the goalkeeper," England-based striker Raúl Jiménez (Fulham/Premier League) said after a lackluster scoreless draw against Uruguay in Torreon last November. "That's what's really sad. Maybe that's why they always take us to the United States."

SHAUN CLARK/ISI PHOTOS/GETTY IMAGES; OPPOSITE: HARRY LANGER/DEFODI IMAGES VIA GETTY IMAGES

WORLD CUP APPEARANCES 18 | **WORLD CUP CHAMPIONSHIPS** 0

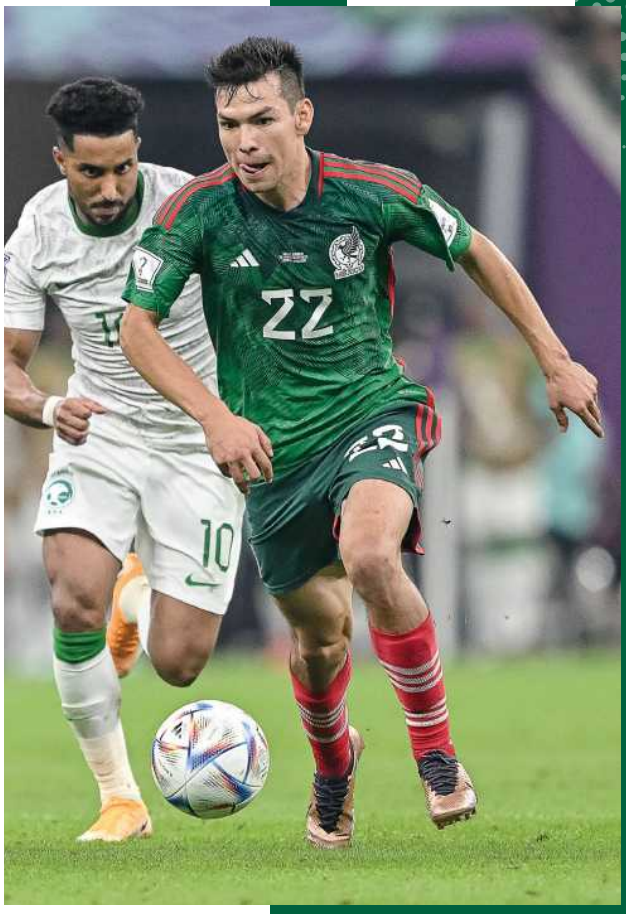
SANTIAGO GIMÉNEZ

Captain Edson Álvarez was overheard sarcastically muttering as he walked off the field: "How nice it is to be at home."

Aguirre caused further friction by suggesting his players needed to grow thicker skin, adding: "The atmosphere has soured, and I understand why. We've let them down over the past six months. … You can deceive your manager, your family even, your agent, the fans, the media, but you can't fool the mirror."

This is a team solid up the middle—central defense, central midfield, striker—but has holes everywhere else. And the quality of the Mexican player has notably slipped. Instead of playing in some of the biggest overseas leagues, they're now seen in Türkiye, Russia, Denmark, Saudi Arabia, Scotland, even Cyprus.

Home crowds and lung-choking elevation will help, but is it enough?



HIRVING LOZANO

FORWARDS

Even at age 35, Jiménez is the best striker in CONCACAF, a pro's pro whose work rate, tactical acumen, and sheer power are a handful for opposing defenders. He has 120-plus caps and is closing in on Javier "Chicharito" Hernández's national-team record of 52 goals. About the only thing Jiménez hasn't done is score in a World Cup, and he's played in three.

AC Milan's injury-plagued Santiago Giménez gives Mexico depth off the bench, along with options like Armando "Hormiga" González of Chivas (Mexico) and Inter Miami's Germán Beterame. The problem is who plays out wide in Aguirre's 4-3-3 system.

Hirving "Chucky" Lozano seemed a good option on the right, until he was dropped by San Diego FC after the 2025 season. Alexis Vega can play there but hasn't always impressed.

Roberto Alvarado of Chivas is the most likely option on the right with his ability to cut inside onto his preferred left foot. One of the center forwards could shift outside as well. But unless they figure something out, or Jiménez finally finds the net in a World Cup, Mexico might have to win a lot of games 1-0.

"In the final third, we lack personality, the determination to create more danger," Aguirre said. "That's our shortcoming."

MIDFIELD

This is the strength of the team, with a mix of leadership, championship pedigree and generational talent. There's one qualifier: when healthy. In March friendlies, Aguirre was without all three projected starters, two resting with minor knocks and Toluca's Marcel Ruiz, the preferred number eight, out for the World Cup after tearing his ACL in March.

KEY TO THE CUP

Aguirre is a patient, prudent coach who is leading Mexico for a third time in a World Cup. In the previous two, El Tri scored just eight goals in eight games and won only three but advanced to the round of 16 both times. They can do the same in 2026—if they can solve the right back conundrum, if Gilberto Mora's young body holds up to the rigors of a tournament format, if they squeeze enough goals out of a suspect front line, and if their fans don't turn on them along the way. Buckle up.

PROJECTED STARTING XI

GK	RAUL RANGEL
D	ISRAEL REYES
D	CÉSAR MONTES
D	JOHAN VÁSQUEZ
D	JESÚS GALLARDO
MF	EDSON ÁLVAREZ
MF	ALVARO FIDALGO
MF	GILBERTO MORA
F	ROBERTO ALVARADO
F	RAÚL JIMÉNEZ
F	ALEXIS VEGA

Defensive midfielder Edson Alvarez is the team's captain, anchor, heart and soul. He's approaching his 100th cap with El Tri and brings experience from Mexico's Club America, the Netherlands' Ajax, England's West Ham and now Turkey's Fenerbahce. He's also versatile enough to play center back if necessary.

Without the steady Ruiz, Aguirre could turn to Spanish-born Alvaro Fidalgo, who in February gained FIFA approval to switch international affiliation to Mexico after playing on Spain's youth national teams and currently with Real Betis (Spain). The 10 is Gilberto Mora, the wonderkid from Club Tijuana who at 17 is poised to become Mexico's next great superstar. He made his Liga MX debut at 15 years, 10 months, and had scored his first goal before he turned 16. Last summer, he became the youngest debutante in history for Mexico's senior national team. He's technically gifted, tactically proficient, quick, shifty, crafty, creative, fearless, lethal.

DEFENSE

César Montes and left-footed Johan Vásquez form a competent if not spectacular central tandem. Both bring extensive European club experience and the ability to play out of the back against a high press. Jesús Gallardo, the third potential starter from Toluca, is a natural left back with the ability to get forward and join the attack.

Which leaves… right back, El Tri's most unsettled position. The first choice would be Rodrigo Huescas, but he blew out his knee in October. Other options include Jorge Sánchez of Cruz Azul, Israel Reyes of Club America, Julián Araujo from Scotland's Celtic, or even Richard Ledezma, the US-born defender from Chivas.

GOALKEEPER

Could we see goalkeeper Guillermo "Memo" Ochoa playing in his sixth World Cup at age 40? It's not as far-fetched as it sounds. Ochoa makes sense to include on the roster simply for the respect he commands from teammates. But he moved closer to being more than a sentimental selection when projected starter Luis Angel Malagon ruptured his Achilles in March and is out for the World Cup.

That leaves Raul "Tala" Rangel of Chivas and Carlos Acevedo of Santos Laguna, neither of whom have been convincing options. Unless one emerges, the cries for "Memo" will grow louder. Imagine that: A 40-year-old and 17-year-old on the field together, Mexico's past and future intersecting at a World Cup on home soil.

COACH AND STYLE

Aguirre is a pragmatist who can be risk-averse, preferring to win 1-0 than 3-2. His preferred alignment is 4-3-3, but Alvarez can drop back to form a five-man defensive line if things get squirrelly in front of goal. Aguirre is old school, enough to know that preventing goals is more important than scoring them in World Cups. Over the last seven tournaments, the champion has allowed an average of 0.5 per game.

CESAR MONTES

MATCH DAYS

GAME 1
→ Thursday, June 11 vs. South Africa
→ Estadio Azteca, Mexico City
→ 3 pm ET

GAME 2
→ Thursday, June 18 vs. Korea Republic
→ Estadio Akron, Guadalajara
→ 9 pm ET

GAME 3
→ Wednesday, June 24 vs. Czechia
→ Estadio Azteca, Mexico City
→ 9 pm ET

WHAT TO EXPECT

The draw sets up nicely for El Tri, with arguably their easiest opponent first in South Africa. Then comes South Korea, a team they beat in both previous World Cup meetings (3-1 in 1998, 2-1 in 2018). The final match against Czechia could be the toughest, since they've struggled historically against European foes, but by then they might have already sealed the knockout phase. Winning the group ensures more matches at Estadio Azteca, their fortress. The sixth game could beckon.

JOS ALVAREZ/JAM MEDIA/GETTY IMAGES)

URUGUAY

2026 WORLD CUP PREDICTION
ROUND OF 32

CAPITAL: MONTEVIDEO • POP: 3.5 MILLION • SOCCER = FUTBOL • FIRST WORLD CUP: 1930 • NATIONAL TEAM NICKNAME: LA CELESTE

GROUP H

This year's World Cup feels like uncharted territory for Uruguay—more questions than certainties, more doubts than confidence. For a nation with such a storied soccer legacy, *La Celeste* rarely arrives at a major tournament with their dressing room in disarray.

They usually show up with a clear plan, a strong identity, and a sense of unity. But this time? It's different. The stakes couldn't be higher—not just for this tournament but for the legacy of an entire generation desperate to prove themselves. Uncertainties have riddled the road to 2026 at every turn. Leadership in Uruguay has undergone a seismic shift in recent years. From the golden days of the 2010s—when Luis Suárez, Edinson Cavani, and Diego Godín dominated world football—the team has slowly rebuilt. Now, only center back José María Giménez remains from that legendary core, a symbol of resilience amid chaos. What was once a confident, disciplined side now appears fractured and uncertain.

The coaching situation adds fuel to the fire. Marcelo Bielsa, renowned as a tactical genius and one of football's most respected minds, took the helm with big plans. His arrival promised a new dawn—an innovative, high-intensity approach that could propel Uruguay back to the summit. But the honeymoon is over. What once seemed like a marriage made in heaven has devolved into a complicated, often toxic relationship.

Bielsa fights battles on multiple fronts: trying to win over players who sometimes seem disconnected from his demanding style, while also clashing with media and critics who question his methods.

This World Cup stands as a critical crossroads—not just for Bielsa's tenure but for this generation of players. It's their chance to cement legacies, to prove they can still compete at the highest level. But it's also a fierce test of leadership—whether Bielsa can unify his squad, motivate them, and implement a system that works amid the chaos.

WORLD CUP APPEARANCES **15** | WORLD CUP CHAMPIONSHIPS **2** ★★

DARWIN NÚÑEZ

KARL BRIDGEMAN - FIFA/FIFA VIA GETTY IMAGES

FORWARDS

Let's talk about goals. Or, more accurately, the absence of consistent goalscoring. Uruguay's biggest challenge might be their inability to generate enough quality chances. It's a blunt truth: they must create more to score more. And that's no small ask, especially with Darwin Núñez leading the line. Núñez possesses immense potential—blistering pace, raw power, and an eye for the goal. Now comes the problem. He is now out of Simone Inzaghi's list to play for his club,

Al-Hilal, in the Saudi Pro League and might only play five matches entering the World Cup, which will obviously affect his continuity, but can also threaten his spot as the starter.

If that should happen, Rodolfo Aguirre, the newly signed Tigres (Mexico) marksman, will be the one who might step up. He creates danger with his dribbling and movement, but needs multiple chances to convert. Facundo Torres offers an interesting storyline. After moving from Palmeiras to Austin FC, his form will be under close scrutiny. The bright side? If Uruguay generates chances in bunches—if they create chaos in the final third—the narrative around their attacking struggles might shift. Talent exists, but transforming that into goals under pressure remains the key.

MIDFIELDERS

The midfield has long been a persistent issue. While some teams suffer from a lack of talent, Uruguay boasts some of the world's best individual midfielders. Federico Valverde, Rodrigo Betancur, Giorgian de Arrascaeta, and Nahitan Nández are all capable of brilliance—hardworking, technically gifted, and with the vision to unlock defenses. Yet despite this wealth of talent, Uruguay's midfield underperforms. They lack the consistency needed to control games and dictate tempo. They often fail to generate sustained, creative play that allows their attackers to thrive. The engine sputters—powerful yet unreliable.

FEDERICO VALVERDE

KEY TO THE CUP

Midfielder Giorgian de Arrascaeta is arguably Uruguay's most vital player heading into this World Cup. The Flamengo star was crowned South American Player of the Year and drove Flamengo's recent success. In Brazil, he's revered—considered one of the best foreign players in the league. Yet, with Uruguay, his impact has been more muted. His role as the creative maestro in attack has yet to fully blossom on the international stage. De Arrascaeta's ability to offer that spark could unlock defenses and create the chances Uruguay desperately needs.

Without a midfield that can dictate play and supply the forwards, Uruguay's attack becomes predictable and easy to shut down. The challenge for Bielsa and his staff is to harness this talent—get these players working in harmony. When they do, Uruguay can be dangerous. But until then, their midfield remains their Achilles' heel and a major question mark heading into the World Cup.

DEFENSE

If Uruguay's backline was firing on all cylinders, the team could be a dark-horse contender. But their defense is a work in progress—at best. A thrashing by the United States (5-1 in November 2025) exposed significant vulnerabilities. Ronald Araújo, once considered the future of Uruguay's central defense, has been battling injuries and mental hurdles. His physical presence at Barcelona suggest-

PROJECTED STARTING XI

GK	SERGIO ROCHET
D	GULLERMO VARELA
D	RONALD ARAÚJO
D	JOSÉ MARÍA GIMÉNEZ
D	MATÍAS VIÑA
MF	FEDERICO VALVERDE
MF	RODRIGO BETANCUR
MF	GIORGIAN DE ARRASCAETA
F	FACUNDO PELLISTRI
F	DARWIN NÚÑEZ
F	MAXIMILIANO ARAUJO

AJ JOHNSON/ISI PHOTOS/GETTY IMAGES

ed he could become a commanding figure for his country. But recent setbacks have taken a toll. Can he regain his confidence and form in time? His health and mindset are pivotal—he's the kind of player who can turn a shaky backline into a fortress or a disaster zone. Giménez will be the foundational anchor of this team, and his form over the past few seasons has left much to be desired.

Then there's the entire defensive structure. No matter how talented the individual defenders are, mistakes happen when the team's cohesion and communication falter. The US match served as a stark reminder of how fragile Uruguay's defensive stability can be. That game wasn't just a blip; it was a warning sign.

GOALKEEPER

The goalkeeper position reflects clear symptoms of the malaise affecting the team. Sergio Rochet remains the top choice, but over the past year, his health has been inconsistent. This has allowed Santiago Mele to step in and fill the gap serviceably. The battle between Rochet and Mele will be crucial, and their performances leading up to their World Cup debut against Saudi Arabia in Miami on June 15 could determine who guards the net.

OFF THE BENCH

The team is still waiting for their world-champion U-20 stars of 2023 to mature and make an impact at the senior level. Meanwhile players like Facundo Pellistri, who has shown flashes of creativity, could become game-changers off the bench or getting the occasional start. Their development and integration could prove decisive in tight moments. Bielsa's tactical flexibility might see him relying heavily on energetic young substitutes to inject life into the team when needed. Depth in attack and midfield could be the difference between advancing and going home early.

COACH AND STYLE

Bielsa continues to be the defining figure behind Uruguay's approach. Known for his intense, meticulous methods, Bielsa emphasizes high pressing, rapid transitions, and tactical fluidity. His teams often play possession-based football, employing complex positional systems that demand exceptional fitness and tactical understanding.

His attention to detail is legendary. Bielsa demands discipline but also grants freedom—an often delicate balance. His attacking philosophy has inspired coaches worldwide, and his influence on modern football is undeniable. But his methods are physically demanding, and his communication style can sometimes create disconnects if not managed carefully.

In Uruguay, his focus on structure and discipline has sometimes come at the expense of the fiery grit that traditionally defined *La Celeste*. Some fans and pundits have voiced frustrations, claiming the team no longer embodies their fighting spirit. That makes this World Cup even more critical—can Bielsa find the right balance? Can he reignite the team's *garra charrúa* (literally, "the claw of the Charrúa," the indigenous people of the region) without sacrificing tactical innovation?

CHARLY TRIBALLEAU/AFP VIA GETTY IMAGES

RONALD ARAUJO

MATCH DAYS

GAME 1
- → Monday, June 15 vs. Saudi Arabia
- → Hard Rock Stadium, Miami
- → 6 pm ET

GAME 2
- → Sunday, June 21 vs. Cape Verde
- → Hard Rock Stadium, Miami
- → 6 pm ET

GAME 3
- → Friday, June 26 vs. Spain
- → Estadio Akron, Guadalajara
- → 8 pm ET

WHAT TO EXPECT

If nothing changes, Uruguay might be a tough team to watch. Their attacking output is inconsistent, and their style can look disjointed. They could struggle to impose themselves or maintain possession against top-tier teams. But if they find rhythm, generate chances, and convert opportunities, surprises could be on the horizon. The reality? They possess undeniable talent, but cohesion remains a work in progress. The defense is vulnerable, the attack inconsistent, and the midfield unreliable.

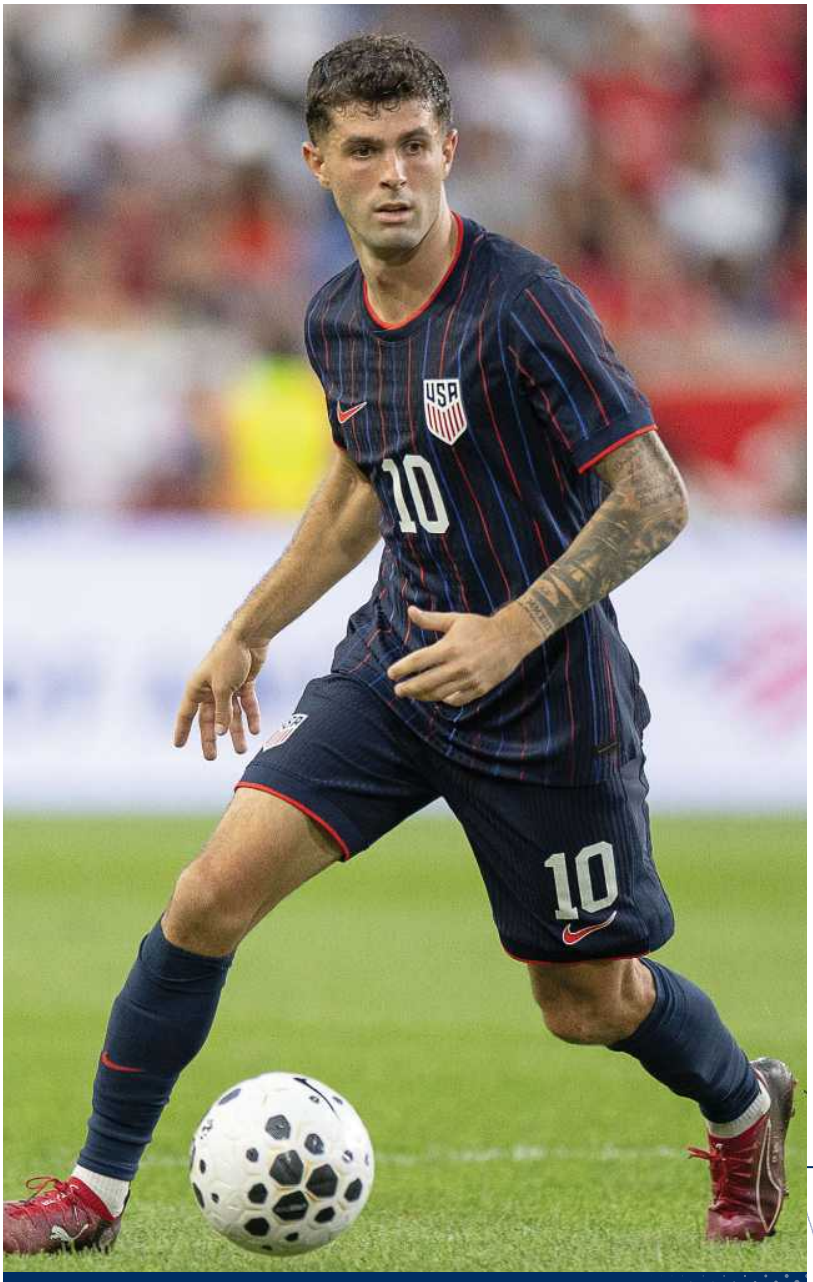
UNITED STATES

2026 WORLD CUP PREDICTION
ROUND OF 32

CAPITAL: WASHINGTON DC • POP: 342 MILLION • SOCCER = SOCCER • FIRST WORLD CUP: 1930 • NATIONAL TEAM NICKNAME: THE STARS AND STRIPES

Winning the World Cup has been the "impossible" dream for at least two decades now—but in 2026, the United States has never had so much going for it. There's unprecedented talent and depth everywhere, a mass of it making imprints within top-five European leagues. The team has a revered manager who has quickly constructed a club-like culture and fostered the idea that anything truly is possible. They'll see massive home crowds, evidence of an actual, genuine, expanding "football" culture three decades in the making. Plus a little momentum, after a November rout of Uruguay, closed a mesmerizing late-2025 stretch.

The World Cup's return, all it represents and all that will follow in its wake, is a victory regardless of how the Yanks fare, but there's never been more pressure to get results. Expectations are rising, and something special is required.



PHOTOS BY JOHN DORTON/ISI PHOTOS/USSF/GETTY IMAGES

WORLD CUP APPEARANCES 12 | **WORLD CUP CHAMPIONSHIPS** 0

CHRISTIAN PULISIC

FORWARDS

Striker has been the Yanks' problem position more or less forever, at least since Brian McBride exited two decades ago. The team's most dangerous attackers—Landon Donovan, Clint Dempsey, now Christian Pulisic—have been creative players with a knack for finding the net and the ability to roam from deep or wide. Manager Mauricio Pochettino has additional striker options this time around. Folarin Balogun of Monaco (France) is first choice after reasserting himself last summer and fall, then following it up with maybe the best extended form we've ever seen from a US forward in a top-five European league. He's streaky but dynamic, and when he's hot, he's a constant threat.

The most efficient finisher is Ricardo Pepi, who has scored big goals in CONCACAF play and at PSV (Netherlands). He's more likely a late entry off the bench. Haji Wright is the purest target striker and the lone No. 9 on this roster with a World Cup goal to his credit—in the Round of 16 against the Netherlands

in 2022. Speedy Patrick Agyemang, the US's leading scorer under Pochettino, has featured when the top tier was missing, and he has delivered.

MIDFIELDERS

Pochettino's tactical shift late last summer changed the mechanics in midfield by employing two wingbacks, one more attack-minded, with a box behind the striker. That's just a starting point; it's a shape-shifting hybrid of three or four at the back that offers attackers great freedom and triggers creativity beyond every previous US side. In this formation, Pulisic takes a more interior space and can have greater influence as a goal-scoring playmaker. He's already being crowned in some corners as America's Greatest Ever, and here's his chance to confirm it.

Pulisic is one of the Yanks' foundational figures, along with Weston McKennie of Juventus (Italy) and Tyler Adams of Bournemouth (Premier League), all heading into their second World Cups, all in their primes. McKennie can literally play anywhere, while Adams' intelligent, industrious work at the No. 6 sets a tone. Tim Weah will be prominent, too, just not sure where. He can play on the flank, high or deep, or in the middle. The biggest lineup mystery not involving health is who will partner with Adams in the midfield double-pivot. Tanner Tessman has impressed with Lyon (France), Johnny Cardoso is finally finding his way with Atletico Madrid, and heady Seattle Sounders legend Cristian Roldan won Pochettino's heart by shutting down Lionel Messi in last year's Leagues Cup title game. Tessman seems the best bet.

CHRIS RICHARDS

DEFENSE

Pochettino's defensive redesign changed everything for the US, solving recurring issues and structural deficits at the back while better connecting midfield to everything behind it and enabling a defter, more coherent attack. Chris Richards and 38-year-old captain Tim Ream are the men in the middle. Mark McKenzie is their likeliest comrade in a three-back setup, with Miles Robinson and possibly Auston Trusty other options.

All things being equal, Dutch-born Sergiño Dest and English-born Antonee Robinson, both starters four years ago, are the wingbacks, with the left-sided Robinson stepping into a back four. Injuries have vexed both the past 18 months; Dest returned from an ACL tear last September; Robinson, out with a

KEY TO THE CUP

The fans need to come through. The players won't have trouble believing, not with Pochettino at the reins, but they'll need to feast on home cooking if they're going to pull off something special. Americans love big events and need to be vocal in support, even those who don't follow the game, and if Pulisic and Co. can capture the nation's imagination, anything might be possible. Perhaps even the "impossible."

PROJECTED STARTING XI

G	MATT FREESE
D	SERGIÑO DEST
D	MARK MCKENZIE
D	CHRIS RICHARDS
D	TIM REAM
D	ANTONEE ROBINSON
MF	TYLER ADAMS
MF	TANNER TESSMANN
MF	WESTON MCKENNIE
MF	CHRISTIAN PULISIC
F	FOLARIN BALOGUN

lingering knee ailment, got his first full call-up after 16 months in March. Fingers are crossed, and there are quality youngsters fighting for their jobs.

GOALKEEPER

Matt Freese supplanted 2022 starter Matt Turner as the No. 1 keeper through a superb CONCACAF Gold Cup last year, barely a week after his international debut. He's a smart one, Harvard grad, and he used his undergrad study of PKs to make three stops in the Gold Cup quarterfinal shootout win over Costa Rica. He's done nothing since to dissuade Pochettino, who values the shot-stopper's consistency, mentality and growth over the past two campaigns into a top-tier MLS netminder. Turner will be the experienced backup after getting regular minutes with the New England Revolution in 2026 after three quiet seasons in England. He knows the landscape well.

OFF THE BENCH

The Americans have never had this kind of depth, a good thing, given the volume of injuries to key figures, an enduring concern heading into the Cup. There are options everywhere—too many for the roster—and especially at fullback with last year's emergence of Alex Freeman and Max Arfsten. The possibilities seem endless in central midfield, with the rise of, among several, spark plug Diego Luna, former coach's son Sebastian Berhalter, and Malik Tillman. Plus, Brenden Aaronson is in fine form in attack at Leeds United (Premier League). Cardoso could finally make an impact, and the wild card is the mercurial Gio Reyna, still getting virtually no club action but perhaps too alluring a talent to leave off a 26-deep squad.

COACH AND STYLE

Pochettino's burning World Cup memory is favorite Argentina's failure to move on from the group stage in 2002, his penalty-conceding foul on David Beckham a prime factor. He went through depression afterward, and it has fueled his underlying philosophy: you may never get another chance, so make this one count. He's the same coach we've seen for the past 15 years—intense, infectious, inspiring, emphasizing hard work, high standards, grit, accountability, and an unerring belief in the cause—and he started getting results as this identity and the culture surrounding it coalesced late last summer. He favors a fluid, morphing 4-2-3-1/3-4-2-1 foundation keyed by a strategic high press, dynamic flank play, and possession with a vertical spin.

TYLER ADAMS

MATCH DAYS

GAME 1
→ Friday, June 12 vs. Paraguay
→ SoFi Stadium, Los Angeles
→ 9 pm ET

GAME 2
→ Friday, June 19 vs. Australia
→ Lumen Field, Seattle
→ 3 pm ET

GAME 3
→ Thursday, June 25 vs. Türkiye
→ SoFi Stadium, Los Angeles
→ 10 pm ET

WHAT TO EXPECT

It's all about getting through an eminently winnable Group D, building momentum, and launching from that. The draw provided familiar faces: Paraguay and Australia, conquered foes during that nifty run last fall, and late-playoff winner Türkiye, which in 2025 beat a US side under construction. Finish first and it's a third-place opponent in the round of 32. Japan, Norway, and Italy are possible, so is Canada. Finishing second might get you Egypt or Iran. Third, and it's likely France, Germany, or Portugal. More giants await the further the run. The Yanks want to prove they belong among the elite. The knockout rounds will reveal the answer.

ALAM/ISI PHOTOS/GETTY IMAGES

CANADA

2026 WORLD CUP PREDICTION
ROUND OF 32

CAPITAL: OTTAWA • POP: 41.7 MILLION • SOCCER = SOCCER • FIRST WORLD CUP: 1986 • NATIONAL TEAM NICKNAME: THE REDS

GROUP B

Co-hosting the 2026 World Cup offers plenty of opportunity for a Canadian side making their third appearance (1986, 2022). Though there is optimism and excitement, unresolved questions linger. Injuries have limited player availability and recent results, including a quarterfinal shootout exit at the 2025 Gold Cup against Guatemala, have been underwhelming. But key absences have allowed others to impress, additional dual nationals have been added to the ranks, and a measure of resilience has been fostered under raised expectations and higher scrutiny.

FORWARDS

Jonathan David is the undoubted star in attack. A dynamic striker, equally adept at dropping deep to create and provide the finishing touch, David has accounted for nearly a third of the goals scored during manager Jesse Marsch's tenure. A high-profile move to Juventus (Italy) required some adjustment, but David's production has improved recently.

Who will play alongside him remains to be seen. Cyle Larin, who was instrumental in qualification for 2022 and has tended to get the best out of David (the two host an occasional podcast together), has been out of form, though a move to Southampton (Championship/England) has spurred a resurgence.

Tani Oluwaseyi, who joined Spanish side Villarreal CF in August, saw the majority of starting minutes alongside David in 2025. Full of running, constantly probing and stretching opposition defenses, he brings a different profile, but that partnership has not been as fruitful.

Promise David, who continues his scintillating form in Belgium with Royale Union Saint-Gilloise, is poised for a bright future. An imposing figure, David brings presence in the box and is a deft finisher. A significant hip injury at the end of February means the 24-year-old will be in a race to be cleared to play.

WORLD CUP APPEARANCES 3 | WORLD CUP CHAMPIONSHIPS 0

ALPHONSO DAVIES

STEPHEN NADLER/ISI PHOTOS/GETTY IMAGES

MIDFIELD

Centrally, Stephan Eustáquio and Ismaël Koné are expected to see the majority of action. The pair form a formidable partnership with Eustáquio, who left Porto FC for LAFC in search of more playing time, orchestrating, organizing, and dictating, while Koné, who has found some stability with Italian side Sassuolo following a tumultuous spell at Olympique de Marseille (France), accelerates the

forward play with his incisive passing and ability to drive into space.

On the right, Tajon Buchanan, teammates with Oluwaseyi at Villarreal, returned from a broken leg during the 2024 Copa América and has been one of Canada's most consistent attacking threats. His opposite on the left, Ali Ahmed, continues to reach new levels at Norwich City in the English second tier. A delightful combination of pace, trickery, and power, both Buchanan and Ahmed possess the ability to drive into spaces and beat defenders one-on-one in wide areas or cut inside. Both can score themselves or set up teammates. They will be a handful for every opponent Canada faces.

One wrinkle, however, is where to deploy Alphonso Davies.

DEFENSE

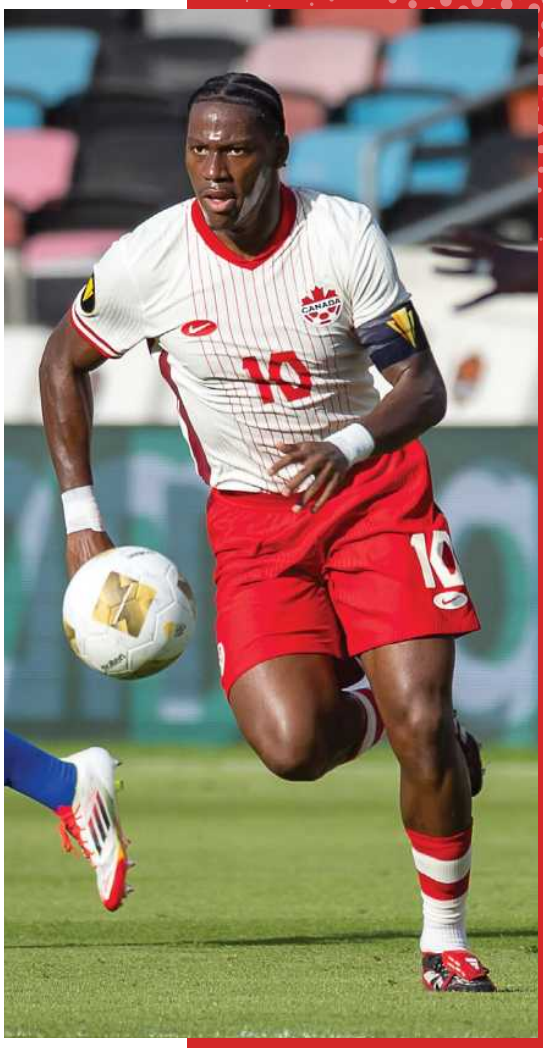
One of the best left backs in the world, Davies is a lock to be on the field, but during his absence—the Bayern Munich star was sidelined for Canada after an ACL tear suffered early in 2025—Richie Laryea of Toronto FC has emerged as the embodiment of how Marsch wants his side to approach matches. Laryea is a competitor, tenacious, unflappable, up for the battle regardless of who is lined up opposite. Canada will need that attitude on the pitch as much as Davies' talent and big game experience.

On paper, the rest of the back four is set: Moïse Bombito of Nice (France) has emerged as Canada's best central defender, the perfect mix of physical assets and game intelligence, a rare combination. To his left, Derek Cornelius, on loan at Rangers (Scotland) from Marseille, has matured into a reliable and calming presence. On the right, Alistair Johnston of Celtic (Scotland) brings a blend of defensive solidity and bidirectional work.

Like Davies, however, each has missed long stretches due to injury. Bombito returned from offseason surgery only to suffer a lower leg fracture in October, Johnston has been troubled by a hamstring injury since then, and Cornelius has been out of action since November with a muscle injury that required surgery. All are expected to be available by summer.

GOALKEEPER

Marsch has been noncommittal in naming a No. 1 keeper with Dayne St. Clair and Maxime Crépeau splitting time equally. It has been a constant source of conversation. Come June's kickoff he will have to make that choice. Both are capable. The 28-year-old St. Clair has a higher ceiling, but Crépeau, 32, is more tested for country—he was outstanding in Canada's thrilling run at Copa



JONATHAN DAVID

KEY TO THE CUP

Capitalize on chances. This Canadian side will find their moments to be dangerous against any opponent—they did so against Belgium, Croatia, and Morocco at the 2022 World Cup, but chances only matter if they are taken. Leave too many on the table, as Canada did in Qatar, and the opponent will not be as kind. It only takes one to advance.

PROJECTED STARTING XI

GK	DAYNE ST. CLAIR
D	ALISTAIR JOHNSTON
D	MOÏSE BOMBITO
D	DEREK CORNELIUS
D	ALPHONSO DAVIES
MF	TAJON BUCHANAN
MF	STEPHEN EUSTÁQUIO
MF	ISMAËL KONÉ
MF	ALI AHMED
F	JONATHAN DAVID
F	TANI OLUWASEYI

JOE BUVID/ISI PHOTOS/ISI PHOTOS VIA GETTY IMAGES

América. Both moved to new clubs in the offseason, Inter Miami and Orlando City, respectively. One suspects that Marsch will be tracking their play closely to go with the hot hand when the World Cup opens.

OFF THE BENCH

Up front, look for whoever does not start alongside Jonathan David to provide a change of tone as a substitute. Larin will bring his veteran attitude, Oluwaseyi verticality, and Promise David that knack for scoring. Daniel Jebbison, Theo Bair, and Jacen Russell-Rowe will all be eager to be earn a place on the squad as well.

In the midfield, Nathan Saliba and Mathieu Choinière made the most of the opportunities in 2025 to emerge as candidates for significant roles. Saliba, only improving since a move to Anderlecht (Netherlands), provides a goal threat, while Choinière slotted in well either alongside or in lieu of now club teammate Eustáquio. Toronto's Jonathan Osorio will bring his veteran intelligence, pitch control, and decision making into tense moments.

There are options in the wide positions too: LAFC's Jacob Shaffelburg and Liam Millar of Hull City (Championship/England) bring width and dynamism—both have been hampered by injuries of late, but most intriguing is Marcelo Flores. The former Arsenal (Premier League) product filed a one-time switch from Mexico. He has been enjoying good form with Tigres UANL in Liga MX and Marsch will be eager to add his playmaking ability into the mix.

Another dual national, Alfie Jones, will likely slot into the middle of defense should either Bombito or Cornelius be unavailable. Jones featured once for Canada before picking up an ankle injury of his own. One of the benefits of the extended absences across the backline is that others have been tested and risen to the challenge. The technically sublime Niko Sigur has impressed at fullback (and midfield), while Zorhan Bassong and Laryea bring more experienced options on either flank. Luc de Fougerolles did the same at center back, while Joel Waterman and Kamal Miller are known quantities.

COACH AND STYLE

The American Marsch has embraced his role as head coach of the Canadian National Team with aplomb, ingratiating himself to the wider soccer community with his unceasing energy and positive attitude. "Intensity" is the word that emerges whenever a player is asked about working under Marsch. From the training sessions to how Canada approaches every aspect of a match, that is the driving idea. That attitude has paid dividends defensively—they conceded just seven goals over 14 matches in 2025.

In attack, Canada excel at playing on the front foot, using their athleticism in the attacking areas of the pitch to unbalance teams. There has been some concern that they struggle to break down opponents—a 1-0 defeat against Australia in October was a case in point—but playing in familiar environs with a host nation at their backs will only fuel that fire.

ISMAËL KONE

ALEX NICODIM/NURPHOTO VIA GETTY IMAGES

MATCH DAYS

GAME 1	GAME 2	GAME 3
→ Friday, June 12 vs. Bosnia and Herz.	→ Thursday, June 18 vs. Qatar	→ Wednesday, June 24 vs. Switzerland
→ BMO Field, Toronto	→ BC Place, Vancouver	→ BC Place, Vancouver
→ 3 pm ET	→ 6 pm ET	→ 3 pm ET

WHAT TO EXPECT

Placed in Group B alongside Switzerland, Qatar, and Bosnia and Herzegovina, Canada has not been done any favors by the draw. Advancing to the knockout stage is the minimum, and if they do, Canada has the potential to go as far as their talent and fan support can carry them. Few expected a semifinal appearance at Copa América, but together Canada found a way.

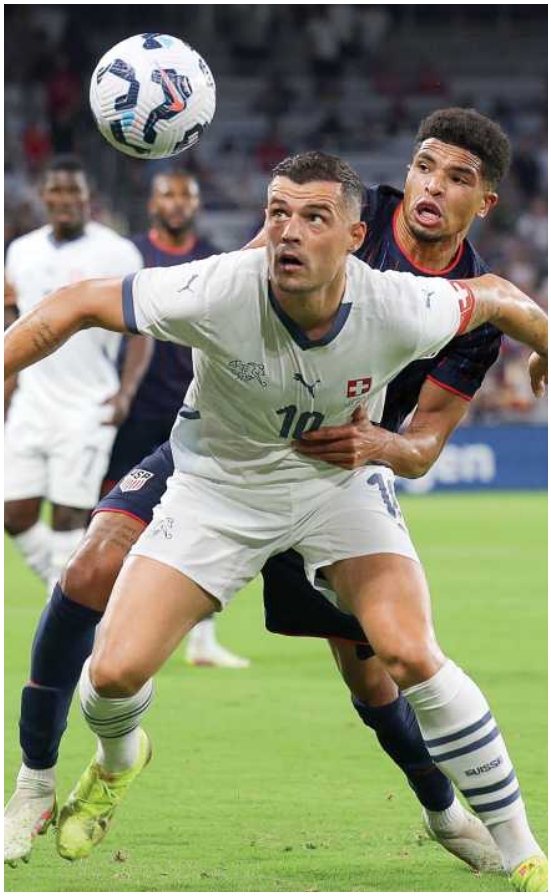
SWITZERLAND

2026 WORLD CUP PREDICTION
ROUND OF 16

CAPITAL: BERN • POPULATION: 9.1 MILLION • SOCCER = FUSSBALL/FOOTBALL • FIRST WORLD CUP: 1934
NATIONAL TEAM NICKNAME: A-TEAM OR THE NATI • WORLD CUP APPEARANCES: 13

The Nati enter their sixth consecutive World Cup and seventh major tournament overall with high expectations to continue a golden period of success. They've earned seven straight qualifications for knockout rounds and two historic quarterfinal appearances at the last two European Championships. With new faces emerging from the shadows cast by the post-Euro 2024 retirements of Yann Sommer, Xherdan Shaqiri, and Fabian Schär, and a selection of experienced heads maintaining consistency in the squad, Switzerland seem well-equipped to keep the good times rolling.

After a tumultuous qualifying campaign for the Euros, manager Murat Yakin has removed the shackles over the last 12 months, and Switzerland's new ruthless streak saw them dismantle both Mexico (4-2) and the United States (4-0) in friendlies before breezing through a tricky World Cup qualifying group against Slovenia, Kosovo, and Sweden. The nation's statement 4-0 and 4-1 victories over the latter two nations further emphasized the attacking quality of a side that finished unbeaten in first place, scoring 14 goals and conceding just two.



GRANIT XHAKA

JOHN DORTON/ISI PHOTOS/USSF/GETTY IMAGES

FORWARDS

Despite all their milestone achievements since 2014, the striker position has always been a problem for Switzerland. Haris Seferović and Mario Gavranović were just a couple of the strikers who produced big moments but ultimately struggled to replicate the consistency of all-time top scorer Alexander Frei. More often than not, that left an over-reliance on Shaqiri, who continually produced magic in major tournaments for the Swiss. More recently, this issue seems to have been resolved.

Since overcoming a serious injury that kept him out of the team for a year-and-a-half between 2023 and 2024, Breel Embolo is in the form of his life for the Nati, scoring seven goals in his last 10 caps. A player that broke through at FC Basel (Switzerland) at the age of 16, it is only now that the Rennes (France) striker is really flourishing in the red shirt.

Also up front, Dan Ndoye has also found consistency in the last year and was a standout player in qualifying. Rubén Vargas is one of the brightest creative sparks on the team and recovered from recent injury woes to excel in qualification. Zeki Amdouni burst onto the scene in 2023 with six goals in his first eight caps and is the kind of natural goalscorer that Switzerland were crying out for. He will face a race for fitness and selection after an ACL tear last summer, but the Swiss are desperately hoping he can be fit for opening day.

MIDFIELD

Granit Xhaka has been an integral part of the Swiss midfield since his debut in 2011, and even more so since assuming the captaincy in 2019. Xhaka is the beating heart of the side, makes Switzerland tick with his quality in possession alongside his leadership skills, and is simply indispensable. Without him, Switzerland simply would not have achieved all that they have since his debut, and the most capped men's player in the Nati's history seems to only be getting better with age. It used to be said that Switzerland would be in trouble when Shaqiri retired, but Xhaka has forced that narrative onto himself with his displays. While also enjoying his best-ever seasons at club level, it seems certain that Xhaka will reiterate that point further at potentially his last World Cup.

Helping him will be 20-year-old Johan Manzambi, who has been a breath of fresh air since breaking into the team last summer. Quick, creative, and able to play in a variety of positions, he has immediately

become a sure-fire pick for Yakin. With three goals and an assist in eight caps, Manzambi is one of the emerging players to watch during this World Cup.

Remo Freuler continues to be an experienced head in midfield, having played in and scored or assisted in the last three major tournaments—the sort of player that can come up with a big moment when Switzerland need it. Fabian Rieder, who made his first start for Switzerland at the World Cup in 2022 against Brazil at the age of 20, has established himself over the last two years and should be a key feature of the Swiss midfield again.

BREEL EMBOLO

DEFENSE

After the retirement of Schär, Nico Elvedi has become the first choice for Switzerland at the center back alongside Manuel Akanji. The defense is probably more settled than ever with Silvan Widmer a solid performer at right back. His absence was felt during Switzerland's Euro 2024 qualifying campaign both in the attacking and defensive areas. Ricardo Rodríguez, having made his debut in 2011, is second only to Xhaka in appearances for the team and rarely misses a game. That being said, the fullback positions and the defense as a whole lack depth.

GOALKEEPER

Yann Sommer had the No. 1 keeper spot locked down since the retirement of Diego Benaglio in 2014. Sommer's departure after the Euros opened the door for Gregor Kobel. Switzerland has been blessed with good goalkeeping depth across the last decade, and Kobel would certainly start regularly for many other national squads. Yvon Mvogo is the usual backup for Switzerland while uncapped Marvin Keller has been a positive performer for Young Boys (Switzerland) in the last two seasons.

COACH AND STYLE

The beginning of Yakin's tenure as Switzerland manager was built upon a defensive resilience that saw the team grind out draws with Italy in qualifying for the 2022 World Cup, finishing top of that section. However, while sometimes effective, it wasn't a sustainable model, as they discovered in the Nations League and in the Euro 2024 qualifying campaign that saw the team consistently concede goals and points to lower-ranked nations.

Yakin still prefers to operate with a lone striker but often switches between the 4-3-2-1 he has used regularly to a 4-3-3, moving around the midfield pieces and attacking options. It helps that he has versatile players such as Vargas, Ndoye, and Rieder. Yakin's approach isn't massively different, but a more settled team and the emergence of these attacking players has allowed more freedom throughout the group. The team seems more defensively sound, more potent in attack and well-rounded than ever before.

JURE MAKOVEC/AFP VIA GETTY IMAGES

GROUP B

MATCH DAYS

GAME 1
- → Saturday, June 13 vs. Qatar
- → Levi's Stadium, San Francisco
- → 3 pm ET

GAME 2
- → Thursday, June 18 vs. Bosnia and Herzegovina
- → SoFi Stadium, Los Angeles
- → 12 pm ET

GAME 3
- → Wednesday, June 24 vs. Canada
- → BC Place, Vancouver
- → 3 pm ET

PROJECTED STARTING XI

GK	GREGOR KOBEL
D	RICARDO RODRÍGUEZ
D	NICO ELVEDI
D	MANUEL AKANJI
D	SILVAN WIDMER
MF	REMO FREULER
MF	GRANIT XHAKA
MF	FABIAN RIEDER
F	RUBÉN VARGAS
F	BREEL EMBOLO
F	DAN NDOYE

WHAT TO EXPECT

Switzerland have been handed a favorable draw in Group B alongside Canada, Qatar, and Bosnia and Herzegovina. The Nati have come through much harder groups than this, and with the third-place safety net, there should be no difficulty in advancing. The opener against Qatar is simply a must-win, and this team has more than enough quality to avoid defeat in the following two matches. The expectation is to finish at the top of the group.

SENEGAL

2026 WORLD CUP PREDICTION
ROUND OF 32

CAPITAL: DAKAR • POPULATION: 19.1 MILLION • SOCCER = LE FOOTBALL • FIRST WORLD CUP: 2002
NATIONAL TEAM NICKNAME: LIONS OF TERANGA • WORLD CUP APPEARANCES: 4

Fans who are expecting Senegal to be—as usual—all flair and free-flowing attacking football might be in for a surprise. The Lions of Teranga have become a team defined as much by discipline and tactical intelligence as by raw talent. Senegal's recent record in the Africa Cup of Nations underlines this approach: winners in 2021, runners-up in 2023, and in 2025—three finals in the last four tournaments.

The 2025 AFCON was memorable, but not for good reasons. Senegal produced a brilliant run through the tournament, ending in a 1-0 victory over Morocco in the final. Unfortunately, it came after Senegal walked off the pitch in protest of a late penalty call. Senegal won after play was re-started. In March, Morocco given the title in forfeit for Senegal's actions. Other than that, though, Senegal didn't just win games; they controlled crucial moments, demonstrating both attacking efficiency and defensive resilience, and proving that they can perform under heavy pressure.

This isn't a team that relies on chance or spectacular solo runs. Instead, it's built around cohesion, balance, and efficiency. Pape Thiaw's side is capable of grinding out results against the continent's best and will approach the 2026 World Cup with a similar mentality: control games, exploit pace on the break, and remain rock-solid at the back. Senegal will quietly believe they can make a deep run even if it means navigating the knockout stages through disciplined defending, smart tactical adjustments, and set-piece efficiency.

SADIO MANÉ

MARC ATKINS/GETTY IMAGES

FORWARDS

Senegal's attack is spearheaded by Sadio Mané, one of Africa's all-time greats. Now in his early 30s, Mané has lost some of his lightning pace but retains lethal finishing, intelligent movement, and experience at the highest level. His 53 career international goals are the most in team history, and at this Cup, he will remain as the team's primary goal threat and leader on and off the pitch. Proof? His 78th-minute goal gave Senegal a 1-0 AFCON semifinal win over Egypt that set up the Morocco clash.

Supporting him are younger forwards such as Ismaïla Sarr, who provide width, energy, and speed on the flanks. Thiaw's preferred system often sees one out-and-out striker supported by two wide attackers. The ability of Sarr, Nicolas Jackson, and other forwards to take some of the pressure that will obviously be placed on Mané will go a long way to helping the team find the net.

Set pieces and counter-attacks are particularly important for Senegal. With tall forwards and excellent delivery from fullbacks and midfielders, corners and free kicks often produce goalscoring opportunities for Senegal. The team's clinical finishing during their AFCON 2025 campaign, including the decisive goal against Morocco, shows how dangerous these transitions can be.

MIDFIELD

Senegal's midfield is the engine room, balancing defensive solidity with attacking support. Idrissa Gueye or Amadou Onana (depending on Thiaw's selection) provide defensive coverage, ball-winning ability, and efficient transitions from defense to attack. Their presence allows the wide attackers and Mané the freedom to exploit space in front of them. Again, their support will be crucial to opening up space for Mané to operate.

More creative responsibilities fall on midfielders like Krépin Diatta or Ibrahima Konaté (when pushed forward), who help link play and generate key passes. The midfielders are disciplined, tasked with controlling tempo, breaking up opposition attacks, and maintaining

Senegal's compact structure. Their ability to retain possession under pressure was critical in their AFCON 2025 run, where tight games against Morocco and Egypt required calm and precise play in the center of the pitch.

DEFENSE

Senegal's defensive line combines experience and physical dominance. Kalidou Koulibaly remains the cornerstone of the back four, offering strength, aerial power, and leadership. He's got more than 100 caps for Senegal and a pro career that included time in Italy, England, and now in Saudi Arabia. Alongside him, younger defenders such as Malick Thiaw or Salif Sané provide energy and tactical intelligence.

Fullbacks like Fodé Ballo-Touré or Bouna Sarr give width on attack but are disciplined enough to track back. Senegal's defenders are also a threat offensively, particularly on set pieces, helping the team compensate if open-play goals are scarce.

NICOLAS JACKSON

Pape Thiaw values a flexible backline capable of switching from four to five at the back depending on the opposition, reflecting a tactical maturity that was honed during their successful AFCON campaigns. Senegal's defensive organization was particularly key in the final against Morocco, where they absorbed pressure and struck decisively on the counter to secure the title.

GOALKEEPER

Édouard Mendy is Senegal's No. 1 goalkeeper, commanding the box with calm authority. His experience in Europe with Chelsea (Premier League) and in international tournaments provides reassurance to the defense. Mendy is capable of making crucial saves, organizing the backline, and contributing to build-up play from the back. Backup options like Alfred Gomis or Seny Dieng offer reliable cover, ensuring Senegal's goalkeeping remains solid.

OFF THE BENCH

Senegal also boasts young talent ready to make an impact. Onana can provide fresh legs in midfield, while attackers such as Boulaye Dia offer speed and energy off the bench. Thiaw's depth allows for tactical rotations, which will be crucial in the group stage and potential knockout fixtures.

COACH AND STYLE

Thiaw became Senegal's coach in December 2024. He has maintained the defensive discipline that has become a hallmark of Senegalese football while injecting tactical flexibility and attacking intent where possible.

The team primarily plays a 4-3-3, but can adapt to a 4-2-3-1 or even a 5-3-2 when defending leads. Senegal is built to control games, absorb pressure, and hit on counters, often using pace and width to stretch opponents. Set-piece efficiency is also a major weapon, capitalizing on height and timing. Their approach and their success during AFCON 2025 perfectly illustrate this balance between defensive organization and attacking efficiency.

ULRIK PEDERSEN/DEFODI IMAGES VIA GETTY IMAGES

GROUP I

MATCH DAYS

GAME 1
- → Tuesday, June 16 vs. France
- → MetLife Stadium, New York/New Jersey
- → 3 pm ET

GAME 2
- → Monday, June 22 vs. Norway
- → MetLife Stadium, New York/New Jersey
- → 8 pm ET

GAME 3
- → Friday, June 26 vs. Iraq
- → BMO Field, Toronto
- → 3 pm ET

PROJECTED STARTING XI

GK	ÉDOUARD MENDY
D	KALIDOU KOULIBALY
D	MALICK THIAW
D	FODÉ BALLO-TOURÉ
D	BOUNA SARR
MF	IDRISSA GUEYE
MF	AMADOU ONANA
MF	KRÉPIN DIATTA
MF	IBRAHIMA KONATÉ
F	SADIO MANÉ
F	ISMAÏLA SARR

WHAT TO EXPECT

Senegal will not be the highest-scoring team, but they will be extremely difficult to break down. Expect a team that is mentally resilient, capable of grinding out results. A good performance in a tough opening match against France could set the tone. Norway and Erling Haaland will be another big challenge. Senegal's final game against Iraq will determine whether they advance.

JAPAN

2026 WORLD CUP PREDICTION
ROUND OF 32

CAPITAL: TOKYO • POPULATION: 123.1 MILLION • SOCCER = FUTTOBORU • FIRST WORLD CUP: 1998
NATIONAL TEAM NICKNAME: SAMURAI BLUE • WORLD CUP APPEARANCES: 8

Japan will be appearing at an eighth straight World Cup, with coach Hajime Moriyasu having publicly declared a desire to lead his team on a run deep into this summer's competition. Buoyed by friendly wins over the Germans and Brazil in 2023 and 2025 respectively, the Japanese have reasons to be confident.

The Samurai Blue breezed through Asian qualifying, becoming the first nation to book their place at the finals alongside the three co-hosts, but for Japan to make the impact Moriyasu desires then the squad must overcome the issues that have hampered them in the past. In four of Japan's seven previous appearances at the World Cup, the country has advanced beyond the group phase; on each occasion, they were eliminated in the first knockout round.

Moriyasu is determined to push his team through that glass ceiling. "I'll be fixated about getting results," Moriyasu said at the start of the year. "Continuing to build on what we've done so far is also something I always have in mind. There's no doubt we're stronger this time around. We can put opponents under pressure, while we can also play being passive but tenacious at the same time to win.

"We're aiming to win the World Cup as a dark horse at the moment. We want to be the favorites in 2050. The overwhelming emotion is to get stronger than we are now and pass the baton to the future."

The core players from the 2022 squad remain and are hitting their peak after four more years of international experience and at the highest levels in Europe. With more Japanese players in Europe than ever before and the J1 League at home a conveyor belt of gifted talent, Moriyasu has Japan's deepest playing pool ever.

KAORU MITOMA

KOJI WATANABE/GETTY IMAGES

FORWARDS

That is not to say that he does not have his concerns. Center forward is a key position in Moriyasu's favored 3-4-2-1 formation and the former Sanfrecce Hiroshima coach has bemoaned a lack of depth for the role. Feyenoord (Netherlands) striker Ayase Ueda has made the position his own over the last three years with his ability to hold up the ball and feed runners coming from deep, ensuring the 27-year-old will be among the first names on the team sheet. His finishing has improved too.

Koki Ogawa has made a strong case to be Ueda's understudy, scoring regularly in matches against lesser opposition within Asia, while the likes of the energetic Daizen Maeda offer a more industrious alternative.

MIDFIELD

Midfield is where Japan's greatest talents lie, both in the attacking positions behind the central forward and in the deeper roles, where Wataru Endo will dictate the tempo of the game from his position in front of the defense. Endo suffered a foot injury with Liverpool in January, but if healthy, will remains a key part of Moriyasu's setup. Endo's cool-headedness and athleticism sit at the heart of the team.

Ritsu Doan provides dynamism on the right from the wingback role with Brighton & Hove Albion's (Premier League) Kaoru Mitoma doing similarly on the left, with both players being asked to shuttle up and down the flank by Moriyasu. Doan's understanding with Takefusa Kubo is of significant importance when Japan are in possession, the Real Sociedad (Spain) playmaker

providing the movement and guile required to open up opposing defenses in tandem with his teammate.

Takumi Minamino would normally fulfill the same role on the left, but a cruciate ligament injury means he is doubtful for the World Cup, opening the way for the more direct Keito Nakamura to step into that position.

DEFENSE

Japan's defense has also been impacted by injuries to key players such as Takehiro Tomiyasu, Hiroki Ito, and Koki Machida, and their availability will shape how that division of the team lines up. The athletic and combative Ko Itakura would certainly be among the options on the right side of the back three that Moriyasu is likely to select, while Shogo Taniguchi brings calmness and experience in the center. Ayumu Seko is an option on the left, as is Junnosuke Suzuki.

TAKEFUSA KUBO

GOALKEEPER

Zion Suzuki, who plays with Parma (Italy), has established himself as Moriyasu's first choice between the posts, the goalkeeper coming through a series of nervy and inconsistent displays to nail down his place in the team. Suzuki's shot-stopping is solid, and his ability to play out with his feet means he fills an important role in how the team builds up when in possession. Tomoki Hayakawa, who has impressed in the J1 League for Kashima Antlers, is an option alongside Keisuke Osako.

OFF THE BENCH

Moriyasu is blessed with a squad that contains considerable depth, even though injuries have hit some of the team's more important performers in the past year. Along with players already mentioned, Junya Ito's pace and direct running are always a threat, especially against tiring defenses. Moriyasu also has an abundance of options in central midfield with Ao Tanaka, Kaishu Sano, and Hidemasa Morita among those who can slot in alongside captain Endo.

COACH AND STYLE

This will be Moriyasu's second World Cup in charge, the 57-year-old having taken over in 2018 after tasting considerable success at domestic level with Sanfrecce Hiroshima, where he played for most of his professional career. He won the Asian Cup as a midfielder with Japan in 1992, guided his club to the J1 League title in 2012, 2013, and 2015, and was known for his cautious but effective methods.

Moriyasu replaced Akira Nishino as coach in the aftermath of the country's heartbreaking last-gasp Round of 16 exit in the 2018 World Cup at the hands of Belgium, when the Japanese squandered a two-goal lead in the final quarter of the game, and took the country to the Asian Cup final in 2019. Moriyasu garnered praise during the 2022 World Cup for his astute use of his entire squad, leading to a big contract extension.

ETSUO HARA/GETTY IMAGES

GROUP F

MATCH DAYS

GAME 1
- → Sunday, June 14 vs. Netherlands
- → AT&T Stadium, Dallas
- → 4 pm ET

GAME 2
- → Sunday, June 21 vs. Tunisia
- → Estadio BBVA, Monterrey
- → 12 am ET

GAME 3
- → Thursday, June 25 vs. Sweden
- → AT&T Stadium, Dallas
- → 7 pm ET

PROJECTED STARTING XI

GK	ZION SUZUKI
D	KO ITAKURA
D	SHOGO TANIGUCHI
D	HIROKI ITO
MF	RITSU DOAN
MF	WATARU ENDO
MF	AO TANAKA
MF	KAORU MITOMA
MF	TAKEFUSA KUBO
MF	KEITO NAKAMURA
F	AYASE UEDA

WHAT TO EXPECT

Japan is faced with a fairly tough group, opening against the Netherlands, expected to advance far. Tunisia should give Japan points enough to advance, but their third game against Sweden is a more of a wild card. They might squeak through with a third-place spot, but beating Sweden would set them up better in the knockout round.

IRAN

2026 WORLD CUP PREDICTION
GROUP STAGE

CAPITAL: TEHRAN • POPULATION: 86.5 MILLION • SOCCER = FOTBAL • FIRST WORLD CUP: 1978
NATIONAL TEAM NICKNAME: TEAM MELLI • WORLD CUP APPEARANCES: 7

Iran returns* to the FIFA World Cup for a fourth consecutive appearance hoping an aging squad can make a long-awaited breakthrough to advance to the knockout rounds for the first time. The nation will be featuring at the tournament for the seventh time since making their debut in 1978 and in each of the previous six appearances at the finals the Iranians have crashed out at the end of the group phase.

There have been several close calls, never more than when the Carlos Queiroz-coached 2018 side missed out on a place in the last 16 after Mehdi Taremi's stoppage-time strike hit the side netting in a 1-1 draw with Portugal. A win would have taken Iran through.

The Iranians had hoped to build on the performances in Russia in 2018 when the tournament rolled around again in four years in Qatar. The 2022 tournament presented the Iranians with the opportunity to move into uncharted territory; a squad that had shown potential four years later was now at its peak and the draw had not been unkind. While England presented a serious obstacle, matches against Wales and the United States were winnable.

Weeks before the finals kicked off, however, social unrest associated with the Women-Life-Freedom protests engulfed Iran and the team became a pawn in the seemingly eternal battle between the people and the Islamic authorities. For once, a people who had long held their national team close to their heart turned against the players and that off-field schism took its toll as a clearly distracted squad fell some way short of building on the performances from the previous World Cups.

That means, four years on, Iran are still looking for that elusive place in the knockout rounds. The question is: do they have the talent and the stamina to finally break through and to do so in the face of a war being waged against them by one of the host nations.

At press time, Iran was set to play in the World Cup, despite the ongoing conflict. Stay tuned to athlonsports.com/soccer for updates.

MEHDI TAREMI

ETSUO HARA/GETTY IMAGES

FORWARDS

Coach Amir Ghalenoei continues to rely on many of the players who helped Iran qualify for the last two World Cup tournaments, with 33-year-old Taremi still leading the line. The former Porto and Inter Milan striker remains the team's talisman in attack and his partnership with Sardar Azmoun has provided many of the finest moments from the last decade and more. But the pair are both in the latter stages of their careers, with Azmoun ever more affected by injuries, having missed considerable chunks of his club season due to knee and foot problems. When they click, as they often have in Asian qualifying, the two have been prolific for Iran, with Azmoun scoring 57 times for the national team up to April while Taremi is only one goal behind.

Elsewhere, Mehdi Ghayedi provides width and pace in the attacking line while Amirhossein Hosseinzadeh has shown the potential to take over as a long-term successor to the prolific forwards ahead of him.

MIDFIELD

Captain Alireza Jahanbakhsh is another of the veterans in the squad. He will be heading to a third World Cup, and provides much of the team's creativity. The 32-year-old spent much of his career in the Netherlands, can play either behind the forwards or on the wing and is ably supported by wingers Saman Ghoddos or Mohammad Mohebi.

Providing the platform for the more attacking players to perform is the experienced Saeid Ezatolahi, who will also be appearing at his third World Cup.

DEFENSE

Experience is, again, the watchword in Iran's backline with 37-year-old Shojae Khalilzadeh and Hossein Kanaanizadegan, 32, the linchpins. The pair formed a solid partnership in central defense throughout much of the team's Asia qualifiers. Ali Nemati was also a regular along the road to North America. Milad Mohammadi, an attack-minded left back, is another in his 30s who has been a regular under Ghalenoei, while Saleh Hardani has featured frequently on the right side of the backline.

Iran's defense conceded eight goals in 10 matches in the third round of Asia's qualifiers for the World Cup, with Ghalenoei's side keeping five clean sheets in the run that saw them book their place for the finals. Disciplined and physical, they can be opened up with pace.

SARDAR AZMOUN

GOALKEEPER

Alireza Beiranvand has been Iran's undisputed first choice between the posts for much of the last decade, and uses his height and commanding presence in the area to positive effect. Now 33, Beiranvand will, like so many others in the squad, be appearing at his third and probably final World Cup. He famously lived on the streets during his teenage years in a bid to realize his dream to play professionally, and now boasts a steely character that's key to the team. Alternatives to the veteran include Payam Niazmand and Sepahan's Hossein Hosseini.

OFF THE BENCH

Many of the options off the bench for Ghalenoei are familiar to anyone who has watched recent Iran teams, but there is a smattering of youth. Kasra Taheri, a 19-year-old on the books of Russian side Rubin Kazan, offers promise in attack while 23-year-old central defender Amin Hazbavi featured in the latter stages of the qualifiers to offer some hope for the future.

COACH AND STYLE

Ghalenoei took over in the aftermath of the 2022 World Cup as the federation brought down the curtain on the Queiroz era following the conclusion of the well-traveled Portuguese's second spell in charge. In Ghalenoei the Iranians have a coach who knows the domestic scene well but who has been criticized by fans for his reluctance to inject new blood into the squad in an effort to reinvigorate the team.

The 62-year-old is in his second spell as coach, having previously been at in charge at the 2007 Asian Cup finals, when the Iranians were eliminated in the quarterfinals. That failure still hangs around his neck in the eyes of many supporters. Can Iran respond in a pressure-packed environment this time around?

MARKUS GILLIAR - GES SPORTFOTO/GETTY IMAGES

GROUP G

MATCH DAYS

GAME 1
→ Monday, June 15 vs. New Zealand
→ SoFi Stadium, Los Angeles
→ 9 pm ET

GAME 2
→ Sunday, June 21 vs. Belgium
→ SoFi Stadium, Los Angeles
→ 3 pm ET

GAME 3
→ Friday, June 26 vs. Egypt
→ Lumen Field, Seattle
→ 11 pm ET

PROJECTED STARTING XI

GK	ALIREZA BEIRANVAND
D	SALEH HARDANI
D	SHOJAE KHALILZADEH
D	HOSSEIN KANAANIZADEGAN
D	MILAD MOHAMMADI
MF	SAEID EZATOLAHI
MF	OMID NOORAFKAN
MF	ALIREZA JAHANBAKHSH
MF	SAMAN GHODDOS
MF	MEHDI GAYEDI
F	MEHDI TAREMI

WHAT TO EXPECT

No team has ever come to a World Cup while being attacked back home by the host. How will Iran react? The team has the advantage of playing their first two games in Los Angeles, home to more Iranians than any world city outside Iran. A game against New Zealand offers a chance for points, but Belgium might prove too tough to overcome. A match against Egypt is the way to the knockout rounds.

SOUTH KOREA

2026 WORLD CUP PREDICTION
ROUND OF 32

CAPITAL: SEOUL • POPULATION: 51.5 MILLION • SOCCER = CHUGGU • FIRST WORLD CUP: 1954
NATIONAL TEAM NICKNAME: TAEGEUCK WARRIORS • WORLD CUP APPEARANCES: 12

If, as the cliché goes, a week is a long time in football, then the past four years have felt like an eternity for South Korea.

After being humbled by a rampant Brazil to end their campaign at the Round of 16 in Qatar in 2022, it's been a rollercoaster ride for fans of the Taegeuk Warriors. It started with the surprise appointment of Jurgen Klinsmann as manager to replace Paulo Bento, a run which came to an abrupt end after a disastrous 2024 Asian Cup campaign. While making the final four there may have been a success, it masked dysfunction within, highlighted by a physical altercation between star players Son Heung-Min and Lee Kang-in on the eve of their semifinal loss to Jordan.

While Klinsmann was swiftly dismissed, replaced by Hong Myung-bo, that was also an appointment not without its own controversy, and amid an environment of dissatisfaction with the Korean Football Association, the mood around the South Korean national team remains one of disenchantment, highlighted by dwindling crowds for recent friendlies.

SON HEUNG-MIN

JUNG YEON-JE/AFP VIA GETTY IMAGES

FORWARDS

As his country's most capped player, and just a few goals away from becoming its leading goal scorer, Son has blessed South Korea with a generational talent. While largely a winger when he played in the Premier League, with LAFC of MLS he has been converted to a center forward, a role he also played with great success at times at Tottenham. It's the position he is likely to occupy this summer for his national team as well. As blasphemous as it would seem, however, Hong has spoken at times of perhaps using Son as a weapon off the bench, looking to maximize his impact within a game, with the emerging Oh Hyeon-Gyu, on the back of impressive form for Besiktas (Türkiye), the other option to consider up front.

MIDFIELDERS

There's depth to choose from here, but all things being equal it seems Hong prefers a central midfield pairing of Hwang In-beom, currently impressing on the books of Feyenoord (Netherlands), and Birmingham City midfielder Paik Seung-ho. But injuries could throw the proverbial cat among the pigeons, with Paik suffering recurring shoulder injuries this season, putting into question his availability should he suffer another knock at club level before the Cup.

Who Hong deploys on the wings is another area that is up for debate. The legendary Son made that left-wing position his own throughout his career with Tottenham in England. But he is more likely to play at the point of the attack, opening up an opportunity for the experienced Lee Jae-Sung. Expect Lee Kang-in, former teen prodigy and heir apparent to Son's throne, to occupy a place on the right wing, while Hwang Hee-Chan is also a possibility should his body ever allow him an injury-free run of games to stake his case.

DEFENDERS

Juxtaposed against their domestic troubles and scandals is the fact that Korea has probably the strongest collection of elite-level talent of any nation in Asia, including Japan. One of those elite talents is central defender Kim Min-Jae, who plays his club football with German giant Bayern Munich. A combative, ball-playing center half, Kim's experience gained with one of Europe's biggest clubs (a regular fixture in the UEFA Champions League) makes him a natural leader in defense.

Who partners with him on the back line has been one area that

manager Hong has yet to really nail down, partly because he has yet to decide on its shape and structure. With a switch to a back three under consideration, Cho Yu-Min, Han-Beom Lee, and Kim Tae-Hyeon are all in contention to join Kim Min-Jae, nicknamed "Monster." But unlike Kim they lack both international and big game experience. Such a tactical shift could be seen as high risk so close to the World Cup, but gives flexibility on D and further up the field.

GOALKEEPER

If Hong is to opt for experience at the back, something he tends to value elsewhere in key positions, it is likely the battle for the No.1 jersey will be between 34-year-old Jo Hyeon-Woo and 35-year-old Kim Seung-Gyu, with the latter perhaps having the inside track. Also in the frame is Song Bum-Keun a standout for Korean champions Jeonbuk Hyundai; he played every game last season and his team had the best defensive record in the league.

LEE KANG-IN

OFF THE BENCH

The bench options available to Hong reflect the strength in depth of this Korean side, which also provides the former Ulsan manager a great deal of tactical versatility. Hwang Hee-Chan, when fit, is one of the most dangerous weapons across Asia. Fitness was a concern ahead of the previous World Cup, but he showed coming off the bench in the final group game how dangerous he can be, scoring a late winner to send South Korea into the Round of 16. A bench role would appear likely again for the Wolves (Premier League) star, ready to bring out his speed, technical, and finishing ability.

One of the most interesting options is that of naturalized midfielder/defender Jens Castrop, a 22-year-old playing regularly for Borussia Mönchengladbach (Germany). Born to a German father and a South Korean mother, Castrop became the first foreign-born, mixed-race footballer to represent the Korean men's national team, having switched allegiance from Germany.

COACH AND STYLE

Hong's work as coach of the nation's underage teams—the quarterfinals of the U20 World Cup in 2009 and bronze at the London 2012 Olympic Games with the U23 side—boosted his reputation as one of Asia's emerging tacticians. After working under the legendary Guus Hiddink in Russia, he was recalled to take charge of the South Korean national team ahead of Brazil 2014, but didn't last after a disappointing result there. Having earned his stripes again domestically with Ulsan Hyundai, Hong was once again given the reins of the national team. Risk averse in style, at Ulsan he stuck rigidly to his preferred 4-2-3-1 formation, but since taking over the national team, Hong has shown flexibility as he looks to get the best out of this squad of players, experimenting with a back three (or back five, depending on your view of the game) and different formations and options in attack.

JOHNNIE IZQUIERDO/GETTY IMAGES

GROUP A

MATCH DAYS

GAME 1
- → Thursday, June 11 vs. Czechia
- → Estadio Akron, Guadalajara
- → 10 pm ET

GAME 2
- → Thursday, June 18 vs. Mexico
- → Estadio Akron, Guadalajara
- → 9 pm ET

GAME 3
- → Wednesday, June 24 vs. South Africa
- → Estadio Monterrey, Monterrey
- → 9 pm ET

PROJECTED STARTING XI

GK	KIM SEUNG-GYU
D	CHO YU-MIN
D	KIM MIN-JAE
D	HAN-BEOM LEE
MF	SEOL YOUNG-WOO
MF	HWANG IN-BEOM
MF	PAIK SEUNG-HO
MF	LEE TAE-SEOK
F	LEE KANG-IN
F	SON HEUNG-MIN
F	LEE JAE-SUNG

WHAT TO EXPECT

Hong Myung-bo will be largely happy with the group stage draw his side received, and while a clash with co-host Mexico offers a stern test, South Africa probably doesn't. Czechia will be key to the team's result. A top three finish is expected, so much will depend on the Round of 32 fixture. Will they have hope of making the Round of 16? That would be considered a good result given the turbulence of the past four years.

ECUADOR

2026 WORLD CUP PREDICTION
ROUND OF 32

CAPITAL: QUITO • POPULATION: 17.5 MILLION • SOCCER = FUTBOL • FIRST WORLD CUP: 2002
NATIONAL TEAM NICKNAME: LA TRICOLOR • WORLD CUP APPEARANCES: 5

If you're looking for free-flowing and attacking football, Ecuador might not be the team for you. La Tri's results during an impressive qualification campaign make it abundantly clear what we should expect—their qualifiers included six scoreless draws. In fact, 14 goals scored and only five conceded make Ecuador the World Cup team with, by far, the fewest goals at both ends during the qualifying stage.

Boring? Maybe, but also highly effective. Sebastián Beccacece's team finished second in the South American group despite having three points deducted for administrative discrepancies, losing only two games out of 18—both 1-0, away from home, against Argentina and Brazil.

Historically, Ecuador's achievements were met with the caveat that it enjoys the major advantage of playing home games in Quito, the world's second highest capital city, at an altitude of nearly two miles. However, that accusation can't be leveled against the current team, which beat Argentina and drew with Brazil at sea level in its alternative home in Guayaquil. Ecuador will therefore be quietly confident of making surprisingly deep progress this summer—even if it might have to be through a series of penalty shootouts.

MOISÉS CAICEDO

FORWARDS

The forward line is spearheaded by a true icon of Ecuadorian football, veteran captain and all-time top scorer Enner Valencia. Now 36, Valencia lacks the pace of his younger years, but his strength, control, and powerful right-footed shooting are all still high class. He scored three of his team's four goals at the 2022 World Cup, so he is used to the big stage.

As you'd expect from such a defensively oriented setup, Ecuador generally plays with only one out-and-out forward, instead preferring to control the rhythm by packing the midfield. However, a 36-year-old clearly cannot play every minute of every game, and Valencia's usual deputy is Kevin Rodríguez, who made no less than 11 substitute appearances during the qualifying campaign.

MIDFIELD

As Ecuador's most high-profile player, Moisés Caicedo is the main cog in a midfield machine designed to choke the opposition and prevent the tempo of the game from becoming too fast or furious. It's no coincidence that the team is built around the destructive talents of Caicedo, whose performances with Chelsea (Premier League) have firmly established him as one of the game's best defensive midfielders. Caicedo's importance to Ecuador cannot be overstated—his absence from this World Cup opener, against Ivory Coast, due to suspension is therefore a major setback.

Alongside him, further stability is provided by the equally well-established Alan Franco, who can also operate as a wingback when the team, as often, plays with a back three and whose priorities are evident from the fact that he scored only one goal in his first 50 international appearances. To further consolidate the central areas, Pedro Vite has quickly asserted himself as a regular starter after impressing during the latter stages of the qualifying campaign.

Somewhat more attack-minded is right wing Ángelo Preciado, another trusted performer with more than 50 caps. The first-choice midfield is completed by the playmaking attributes of Gonzalo Plata, who has the greatest responsibility of supporting Valencia in attack.

RODRIGO BUENDIA/AFP VIA GETTY IMAGES

DEFENSE

La Tri benefits from a settled defensive line oozing with class. The anchor is center back Willian Pacho, who achieved the rare feat of playing every single minute during the qualifying campaign, and has further enhanced his glowing reputation with a couple of excellent club seasons for Paris Saint-Germain. Pacho has the potential to become of one the World Cup's standout defenders, and it helps that he enjoys a strong partnership with the equally imposing Félix Torres—also a major attacking threat from set-pieces. The formidable trio is completed by Piero Hincapié, who has been outstanding over the last few months for Arsenal (Premier League).

That high-quality group, supplemented by youngster Joel Ordóñez when necessary, gives coach Beccacece the flexibility to switch between a three- or four-man defensive setup. The wild card is AC Milan's Pervis Estupiñán, who is equally comfortable as a left back or in a more attacking midfield role.

WILLIAN PACHO

GOALKEEPER

One of the oldest players at the World Cup, 39-year-old Hernán Galíndez is the starter between the posts. Born in Argentina, Galíndez settled in Ecuador and became a naturalized citizen during an eight-year spell with local club side Universidad Católica. He quickly became the national team's first choice and started all three games in the 2022 World Cup group stage. He hopes to help his team go further this time around, supported by long-term backup Moisés Ramírez.

OFF THE BENCH

The rising star of Ecuadorian football is 19-year-old attacking midfielder Kendry Páez, the youngest-ever goalscorer in the country's top league and a genuine game-changer. Páez was signed by Chelsea shortly after his 18th birthday but has spent the last few months in Argentina on loan with River Plate, and he'll be eager to justify his reputation as a breakthrough talent.

Elsewhere, the element of surprise could be provided by a pair of promising young forwards whose international experience has so far been limited. Winger Nilson Angula, 22, did enough during his time with Belgian club Anderlecht to earn a move to Premier League side Sunderland in February, and another wide option comes from John Mercado—a regular on the scoresheet this season for Czech powerhouse Sparta Prague.

COACH AND STYLE

Argentine Beccacece was a somewhat surprising choice to take over Ecuador in 2024, having suffered relegation with his previous club, Spanish side Elche. But the 45-year-old had spent many years prepraing for this role by serving as an assistant coach for the Chile and Argentina national teams, alongside his mentor Jorge Sampaoli. Beccacece's style, however, is rather different, with its emphasis on rigid, disciplined defense.

DANIEL JEFFERSON/USSF/GETTY IMAGES

GROUP E

MATCH DAYS

GAME 1
- → Sunday, June 14 vs. Ivory Coast
- → Lincoln Financial Field, Philadelphia
- → 7 pm ET

GAME 2
- → Saturday, June 20 vs. Curacao
- → Arrowhead Stadium, Kansas City
- → 8 pm ET

GAME 3
- → Thursday, June 25 vs. Germany
- → MetLife Stadium, New York/New Jersey
- → 4 pm ET

PROJECTED STARTING XI

GK	HERNÁN GALÍNDEZ
D	FÉLIX TORRES
D	WILLIAN PACHO
D	PIERO HINCAPIÉ
D	PERVIS ESTUPIÑÁN
MF	MOISÉS CAICEDO
MF	ALAN FRANCO
MF	ÁNGELO PRECIADO
MF	GONZALO PLATA
MF	PEDRO VITE
F	ENNER VALENCIA

WHAT TO EXPECT

What not to expect is goals, because Ecuador has a fair chance of being the best defensive team at this World Cup and will base its approach accordingly. The opening game could be crucial: a tough meeting with African powerhouse Ivory Coast in Philadelphia without Caicedo. Then comes a must-win meeting with Curaçao, before group play concludes against Germany.

AUSTRIA

2026 WORLD CUP PREDICTION
ROUND OF 16

CAPITAL: VIENNA • POPULATION: 9.4 MILLION • SOCCER = FUSSBALL • FIRST WORLD CUP: 1934
NATIONAL TEAM NICKNAME: UNSERE BURSCHEN • WORLD CUP APPEARANCES: 8

It may come as a surprise to some that this is Austria's first World Cup since way back in 1998, but manager Ralf Rangnick and his squad will be determined to show that the expanded tournament format isn't the only reason "Das Team" finally clinched a long-awaited seat at the top table.

Having caught the eye continentally with a few swashbuckling displays at the last couple of Euros, there was expectation—and an unfamiliar pressure—on the Austrians to lead their qualifying group ahead of Romania and Bosnia and Herzegovina, and head back to the game's biggest stage. They got the job done, though they needed a nervy last-day draw against Bosnia to bypass the dreaded European playoff phase. As they prepare to head to training camp in beautiful Santa Barbara, California, ahead of their World Cup games, there are still a few personnel questions for Rangnick to sort out before he leads this experienced generation of Austrian players into uncharted territory.

DAVID ALABA

GUENTHER IBY/SEPA.MEDIA /GETTY IMAGES

FORWARDS

Talking of experience—striker Marko Arnautovic will be 37 years old by the time Austria kick off their Group J campaign. He's collected more caps for the Alpine nation than any other player, and his eight goals in qualifying took him to 47 overall, ensuring that he heads into the World Cup as Austria's record scorer. He may be past his peak, but he's still putting up good figures for club side Crvena Zvezda (Serbia), and his brash, confident persona means that he won't shirk the challenges ahead as he looks to end his international career on a high.

Michael Gregoritsch is the other trusted forward in the camp. Fittingly, it was his late goal against Bosnia and Herzegovina that sealed passage through the qualifiers, continuing his knack of netting in key moments for his country—a habit which has earned him cult status in Austria. Although the team often features just one central striker, Rangnick could do with some of the younger forwards to step up and help carry the load, too.

MIDFIELD

One half of the holding midfield duo for Austria will almost certainly be taken by Nicolas Seiwald, whose defensive contributions to the side are crucial. Workhorse Xaver Schlager is likely to be the preferred option to win balls back alongside his club teammate, but it's in the attacking midfield department where Rangnick has more flexibility.

Christoph Baumgartner brings his incisive forward-pass-and-move play to what would be an all–RB Leipzig (Germany) trio in the center. Marcel Sabitzer can be deployed centrally or on the left, adding big-game experience and a keen eye for a shot from range, allowing Romano Schmid to get wide on the right to create chances for other forwards. With Patrick Wimmer and Marco Grüll providing squad depth, it's in this area where Austria need the sparks to fly if they're to go far this summer.

DEFENDERS

David Alaba has won it all at club level, and 17 years on from his Austria debut, he's set to lead his side out at a World Cup for the first time. These days, his mere presence is almost as valuable to the team unit as his defensive abilities, as his former advanced fullback role is now well covered by Konrad Laimer. Laimer has revolutionized his game at FC Bayern (Germany), and he's now effective as a playmak-

er who drives through midfield and into the penalty area, earning more chances on goal for himself and his teammates.

Philipp Lienhart seems to have Rangnick's approval as a starting central defender, Kevin Danso has been impressive for Tottenham, and rising Bundesliga star Leo Querfeld has shown maturity beyond his age (22) time and again at Union Berlin, giving the coach some decisions to make as he looks to cement his best back-four.

MARKO ARNAUTOVIC

GOALKEEPER

This is something of a trouble spot for the team. For several years now, Austria's No. 1 keeper role has been subject to a scrap between four different shot-stoppers. That number dropped to two likely candidates during the course of qualifying, with Red Bull Salzburg's Alexander Schlager apparently just shading the battle ahead of Patrick Pentz. Schlager has long been seen as Austria's top keeper domestically, but every now and then he's prone to major errors. If he does get the nod, the team will need him to step up and seize his role as the senior stopper.

OFF THE BENCH

Having won titles in Austria with Sturm Graz, defender Alexander Prass is now flying high in Germany with TSG Hoffenheim. He can provide excellent left-sided cover from fullback to winger, and comes into the World Cup with momentum from his impressive club season. Another who can come on and make a difference is Wimmer. Good in the air, composed on the ball, and creative from anywhere across the midfield, the Wolfsburg (Germany) man is likely to be one of the first names to be sent on from the bench.

If the coach has one last roll of the dice, SK Rapid (Austria) striker Nikolaus Wurmbrand could be called upon. The 20-year-old can shoot well with either foot, chases down every ball, and can be deployed anywhere in the Austrian attack, demonstrating useful versatility. He's only got a couple of caps to his name so far, but already he's managed a goal and an assist, so this might be just the time for him to raise his profile sharply.

COACH AND STYLE

Rangnick, from Germany, is seen as one of the masterminds behind the high-pressing, quick transitional play popularized by Red Bull clubs over the last decade-and-a-half. He's a coach who likes to effect change throughout an organization, and his efforts to modernize Austrian football from within have been largely met with scorn. Crucially, however, the players are on his side.

Under Rangnick, the national team plays a brand of football far more familiar to the players from their club roles, mostly at German Bundesliga sides. One of his core tenets is setting up the team to win the ball back high up the field, and get a shot away within 10 seconds. He's taught the team to push forward, leave everything out on the pitch, and perhaps most importantly—aim high. They may not be the most talented squad at the tournament, but with Rangnick at the helm, the Austrian players believe that anything is possible.

GUENTHER IBY/SEPA.MEDIA /GETTY IMAGES

GROUP J

MATCH DAYS

GAME 1
- → Wednesday, June 17 vs. Jordan
- → Levi's Stadium, San Francisco
- → 12 am ET

GAME 2
- → Monday, June 22 vs. Argentina
- → AT&T Stadium, Dallas
- → 1 pm ET

GAME 3
- → Saturday, June 27 vs. Algeria
- → Arrowhead Stadium, Kansas City
- → 10 pm ET

PROJECTED STARTING XI

GK	ALEXANDER SCHLAGER
D	KONRAD LAIMER
D	PHILIPPE LIENHART
D	DAVID ALABA
D	PHILLIPP MWENE
MF	ROMANO SCHMID
MF	NICOLAS SEIWALD
MF	CHRISTOPH BAUMGARTNER
MF	XAVER SCHLAGER
MF	MARCEL SABITZER
F	MARKO ARNAUTOVIC

WHAT TO EXPECT

Austria was happy to have avoided any familiar opponents in the draw. Don't be surprised to see them rise to the occasion and test Argentina, before throwing everything at a crucial final Group J game against Algeria, a key game if they want to advance. Under Rangnick, this team will relish the big games, and a place in the Last 16 is a realistic ambition for one of the less-heralded European sides.

AUSTRALIA

2026 WORLD CUP PREDICTION
GROUP STAGE

CAPITAL: CANBERRA • POPULATION: 27.9 MILLION • SOCCER = SOCCER • FIRST WORLD CUP: 1974
NATIONAL TEAM NICKNAME: SOCCEROOS • WORLD CUP APPEARANCES: 7

For a nation that had to endure a torturous 32-year wait between their first and second appearances at the World Cup, Australia is now making a habit of appearing at football's global showpiece. Having earned direct qualification for the first time since 2014—they had to navigate the playoffs for both 2018 and 2022—this tournament will mark their sixth straight appearance since breaking the drought in 2006.

Twenty years on from that tournament in Germany, one of the heroes from that era now manages the team—no-nonsense former defender Tony Popovic. Parachuted in to rescue their qualifying campaign when Graham Arnold walked away during qualifiers, Popovic's side went undefeated for the rest of the campaign as he oversaw not just a change in style, but a significant change in personnel to go along with it.

JACKSON IRVINE

STEVE CHRISTO - CORBIS/CORBIS VIA GETTY IMAGES

FORWARDS

If it wasn't certain before his January move to Norwich City (Premier League) that Mohamed Toure would lead the line for the Socceroos in North America, then it certainly was afterwards. Making the move from Danish side Randers, Toure had a blistering start to life at his new club, with five goals in his first three games to not only make a name for himself in Norfolk, but to nail down a spot on Popovic's side.

That form matters in a side that has often struggled to find the back of the net. In their final four games of 2025, all played on North American soil to prepare for the World Cup, Australia scored just two goals. Also working in Toure's favor is the fact he is a former club teammate of both Nestory Irankunda and Riley McGree at Adelaide United (Australia).

MIDFIELD

Fitness issues are a recurring theme for Australia heading into the World Cup, with injury hitting talismanic midfielder Jackson Irvine and limiting his opportunities at St Pauli (Germany) this campaign, but expect the veteran to start, most likely alongside Aiden O'Neill, if fit.

Popovic's use of inverted wingers has been a feature of his evolution of the national team since taking charge in October 2024. He has experimented with a number of players in those positions. McGree, arguably Australia's most creative outlet, is back at full fitness and close to a lock for one of those roles.

The big question remains what Popovic does with Irankunda. An exceptional talent, the 20-year-old is far from the finished product, but the X-factor he provides is hard to ignore. Does the manager throw caution to the wind, or opt for a steadier and more reliable pair of hands?

DEFENDERS

So much of what Australia has been able to achieve under Popovic has been built on having a resolute defense—it has been a hallmark of his style as a coach that allowed him to have great success in Australia's A-League with Western Sydney Wanderers, Perth Glory, and Melbourne Victory. Despite conceding just six times in eight games during qualifying, the Aussie defense is far from a settled unit, with injuries and fitness throwing into question its personnel.

One player not in doubt is 22-year-old Alessandro Circati, who is making a name for himself in Italy with Parma. Calm and composed on the ball, he exudes leadership despite his tender age, having captained both club and country already, and has already established himself as one of the first names on the team sheet.

Doubt remains over the fitness of the towering Harry Souttar, who was one of Australia's best in the heart of defense in Qatar in 2002 as they made the Round of 16. If he's not fit, that might open the door for either Milos Degenek or Jason Geria in what is likely to be a back three, with Cameron Burgess almost nailed down for the other spot.

Another headache for Popovic surrounds the right wingback role. Veteran Lewis Miller had an iron-like grip on the position, but an untimely Achilles injury in February ruled him out of the World Cup, leaving a hole with no natural replacement.

On the other side of the formation, the decision looks easy, with Jordan Bos in flying form for Feyenoord (Netherlands), making himself one of the team's most important players in a likely 5-4-1 formation.

JORDAN BOS

GOALKEEPER

Australia might be unique at this tournament for the fact that their captain, Mathew Ryan, is not a guaranteed starter. Though Ryan is a long-time No.1 for the Socceroos, Popovic has often benched the veteran in favor of fresh blood, either Joe Gauci or Paul Izzo. Popovic worked with Izzo at Melbourne Victory and is a fan of the Denmark-based shot-stopper. Ryan's big game experience, however, having played at the previous three World Cups, and being a regular for Levante (Spain) might tip the balance in his favor. But it is far from certain—expect Popovic to leave everyone guessing until the final moment.

OFF THE BENCH

The options available to Popovic off the bench will depend on which way he goes with his starting XI. Aziz Behich is an option for the all-important left wingback role, and while not offering as much in an attacking sense, he is a more defensive option than Bos, if Australia need to close up shop late in a game. Ajdin Hrustic is back playing again, and offers a level of creativity that is lacking in most other midfield options, perhaps with the exception of McGree, while Adrian Segečić, uncapped despite impressive form for Portsmouth, is a wild-card option in attack.

COACH AND STYLE

Popovic is a drill sergeant. Speak to any player that has played under the decorated coach and they'll all have stories to tell about his strict disciplinarian style. From daily skin fold checks, to monitoring their sleep, and even banning candy from the dressing room, the 52-year-old doesn't cut corners, and he expects the same of his players. Despite how it sounds, however, players absolutely love playing for him because he gets the best out of them.

A tough defender in his playing days, most notably with Crystal Palace (Premier League), he became the first player from Australia's famed "Golden Generation" of 2006 to lead the national team, and will become the first Australian to both play and coach at the World Cup.

OMAR VEGA/GETTY IMAGES

GROUP D

MATCH DAYS

GAME 1
- → Saturday, June 13 vs. Türkiye
- → BC Place, Vancouver
- → 12 am ET

GAME 2
- → Friday, June 19 vs. United States
- → Lumen Field, Seattle
- → 3 pm ET

GAME 3
- → Thursday, June 25 vs. Paraguay
- → Levi's Stadium, San Francisco
- → 10 pm ET

PROJECTED STARTING XI

GK	MATHEW RYAN
D	JASON GERIA
D	MILOS DEGENEK
D	ALESSANDRO CIRCATI
D	CAMERON BURGESS
MF	NESTORY IRANKUNDA
MF	JACKSON IRVINE
MF	AIDEN O'NEILL
MF	RILEY MCGREE
F	JORDAN BOS
F	MOHAMED TOURE

WHAT TO EXPECT

Australian media love to scream "Group of Death" for Australian sides, but this is rather a group of opportunity. Australia will fancy their chances of progression. Where that sends them from Group D could depend on the outcome of the "Showdown in Seattle" against the United States. Either first or second place presents favorable paths to a potential Round of 16, which would be a success for what is still a developing side.

NORWAY

2026 WORLD CUP PREDICTION
QUARTERFINALS

CAPITAL: OSLO • POPULATION: 5.6 MILLION • SOCCER = FOTBALL • FIRST WORLD CUP: 1938
NATIONAL TEAM NICKNAME: RØDE, HVITE, BLÅ • WORLD CUP APPEARANCES: 4

For the first time since 1998, Norway returns to the men's World Cup, ending one of Europe's longest and most frustrating absences. With a squad led by two of the most recognizable players in world soccer, Norway arrive not simply to participate, but to test whether this long-awaited generation can translate promise into victory.

The context matters. Norway's failure to reach recent major tournaments created skepticism about whether a team built around star power could ever function cohesively. That question was answered during qualification, where structure, discipline, and game management complemented attacking quality. The challenge now is different. Tournament soccer demands patience, defensive concentration, and ruthlessness in limited moments. Norway possess the tools, but must prove they can apply them consistently on the biggest stage.

ERLING HAALAND

FORWARDS

Norway's attacking identity is unmistakable. The team is built around a classic No. 9 in Erling Haaland, whose physical presence, movement, and finishing ability change how opponents defend. With 55 goals in just 48 international matches, Haaland will be one of the most feared strikers in the tournament. Haaland's presence inside the penalty area also opens space for runners and creators around him.

Alexander Sørloth offers a more physical alternative up front, capable of leading the line, contesting aerial duels, and occupying central defenders when Norway need to alter tempo or protect a lead. Despite playing second fiddle to Haaland for much of his international career, Sørloth has still netted 26 times for the national team.

Out wide, Norway have developed greater variety than in previous cycles. Antonio Nusa provides pace and directness, capable of stretching compact defenses and attacking defenders one-on-one.

MIDFIELD

The midfield revolves around Martin Ødegaard, whose influence extends far beyond assists and goals. As captain, he dictates tempo and serves as the connective tissue between midfield and attack. His ability to find pockets of space against disciplined defenses will shape Norway's ceiling in this tournament.

Alongside Ødegaard, Sander Berge provides physicality, ball retention, and defensive coverage, particularly important against teams that dominate central areas. His presence allows Ødegaard freedom to operate higher up the pitch.

Fredrik Aursnes adds tactical intelligence and work rate, capable of playing multiple roles depending on game state. His return to the international fold gives Norway a stabilizing presence, particularly valuable in matches where discipline and structure outweigh attacking ambition. Patrick Berg offers another option, especially in games that require positional discipline and controlled buildup. His experience captaining the remarkable performances by Bodø/Glimt (Norway) in the UEFA Champions League will prove invaluable should he be called upon. The depth here is notable compared to earlier.

DEFENSE

Norway's defensive unit has quietly become one of the foundations of this team's resurgence, evolving from a perceived weakness into a disciplined, organized group. Conceding just five goals in eight qualification matches underlines the progress. This is a back line built on cohesion and concentration rather than flair, but it has delivered the stability Norway long lacked.

ELIANTON/MONDADORI PORTFOLIO VIA GETTY IMAGES

Kristoffer Ajer's versatility allows him to operate centrally or wide, offering aerial strength and composure in buildup. Leo Østigård brings aggression and leadership, particularly valuable in defending the penalty area and set pieces. Together, they form a pairing capable of handling physical forwards, though their pace in behind remains a concern against elite opposition.

At fullback, Norway prioritizes discipline. Julian Ryerson provides reliability and energy, balancing forward runs with defensive work. Consistency rather than flair defines the role, with the emphasis on maintaining shape and supporting midfield rotations.

Norway are unlikely to dominate possession against top sides, making defensive concentration essential. When lines remain compact and spacing is managed well, the back line is capable of absorbing pressure. When stretched, vulnerabilities appear quickly.

MARTIN ØDEGAARD

GOALKEEPERS

The goalkeeping position is one of Norway's quiet strengths. Ørjan Nyland brings experience and composure, particularly valuable in managing high-pressure moments. His shot-stopping has proven reliable, conceding just one goal in two qualification matches against Italy. Nyland's role is not to dominate matches, but to provide stability.

OFF THE BENCH

Norway's bench reflects a squad that has matured. There are fewer specialists and more adaptable contributors. If he does not start, Sørloth's ability to change the dynamic of a match is central. His physical presence and aerial strength offer a direct alternative when Norway need to stretch play or protect a narrow lead. Midfield depth allows tactical adjustments without sacrificing defensive balance.

Out wide, Norway can inject creativity and unpredictability. Oscar Bobb can drift inside to combine and create overloads between the lines. Andreas Schjelderup brings a slightly different dimension: quick over short distances, confident in one-on-one situations, and capable of operating on either flank.

Defensive substitutions are designed to protect leads rather than chase games. This pragmatic approach marks a shift from previous cycles, when Norway often lacked credible in-game solutions and struggled to control the pace.

COACH AND STYLE

This is not a possession-dominant team, nor one that seeks to overwhelm opponents through volume. Instead, the emphasis is on compact defensive organization, controlled pressing, and efficient attacking moments. The presence of elite attackers allows Norway to remain patient, knowing chances should come. The challenge lies in maintaining discipline across three group matches and adapting to different opponents without losing identity. As a team with limited recent tournament experience, Norway must learn quickly. But with structure in place this is the most complete Norwegian side seen in decades.

SEBASTIAN FREJ/MB MEDIA/GETTY IMAGES

GROUP I

MATCH DAYS

GAME 1
- → Tuesday, June 16 vs. Iraq
- → Gillette Stadium, Boston
- → 6 pm ET

GAME 2
- → Monday, June 22 vs. Senegal
- → MetLife Stadium, New York/New Jersey
- → 8 pm ET

GAME 3
- → Friday, June 26 vs. France
- → Gillette Stadium, Boston
- → 3 pm ET

PROJECTED STARTING XI

GK	ØRJAN NYLAND
D	JULIAN RYERSON
D	LEO ØSTIGÅRD
D	KRISTOFFER AJER
D	BIRGER MELING
MF	SANDER BERGE
MF	FREDRIK AURSNES
MD	MARTIN ØDEGAARD
F	ANTONIO NUSA
F	ERLING HAALAND
F	ALEXANDER SØRLOTH

WHAT TO EXPECT

Norway is a dangerous team built around elite attacking talent. With Haaland's finishing and Ødegaard's creativity, they can punish even small defensive mistakes. Progressing from the group stage is a realistic goal under the expanded format. A big win in the first group match could give Norway the momentum needed to carry them into the Round of 16, but defensive discipline will determine how far this run extends.

PANAMA

2026 WORLD CUP PREDICTION
GROUP STAGE

CAPITAL: PANAMA CITY • POPULATION: 4.3 MILLION • SOCCER = FUTBOL • FIRST WORLD CUP: 2018
NATIONAL TEAM NICKNAME: LOS CANALEROS • WORLD CUP APPEARANCES: 2

Panama returns to the World Cup after qualifying for the first time in 2018. After making it to the final of the 2023 Gold Cup and the 2025 Nations League, Panama is staking their claim to being the best team in the region outside of the three North American hosts. The draw they faced in 2018 around was daunting, and the ping-pong balls again did Panama no favors. But the team is better this time around, with a roster that features veterans from that 2018 team and promising new faces.

ADALBERTO CARRASQUILLA

FORWARDS

Panama's forward line is the unit with the biggest questions. There are players who have become regulars but aren't scoring consistently enough for fans' liking. That said, it's hard to argue that Cecilio Waterman hasn't delivered in big games. He scored a late goal in the 2025 CONCACAF Nations League semifinal to shock the United States and move into the final, memorably jumping onto an on-field TV set to celebrate with French legend Thierry Henry, at the match working as a pundit. The 35-year-old also came up big when Panama needed him most in qualification.

While Waterman has the history, the starting job could be José Fajardo's to lose. He has been impressive with Ecuadorian club Universidad Catolica and scored a winner for Panama against El Salvador in a tense World Cup qualification contest.

Panama's wide attackers are more consistent. While he's struggled with injuries, León (Mexico) winger Ismael Díaz may be Panama's most dangerous player when fit. He was the top scorer in the 2025 Gold Cup, with six goals in four matches. It was also the second Gold Cup in a row in which he scored a hat trick.

José Luis Rodríguez and Édgar Yoel Bárcenas are also based in Mexico and have been fixtures of the national team. Bárcenas is a creative player who loves to set up teammates with scoring chances, while Rodríguez may be more likely to go for a goal himself.

MIDFIELD

Panama's midfield is its heart and soul. Adalberto Carrasquilla does a bit of everything, protecting the back line by winning the ball back from dangerous attackers, getting forward to arrive in the box as a scoring option, and hitting free kicks that fluster opposing defenders. This tournament could be a launchpad back to Europe if he performs. After moving to Spain early in his career, he starred for the Houston Dynamo of MLS and later Pumas (Mexico) but has the quality to be in a European league.

If it's a springboard for Carrasquilla, it's a farewell for Aníbal Godoy. The bruising 36-year-old midfielder has played for Panama more times than any other player in history and still has plenty to give. That said, he may not be a starter in midfield, with Cristian Martínez often getting the nod next to Carrasquilla. Martínez has bounced around at the club level but has been consistent with Panama, showing his passing ability in addition to his skills in recovering the ball. He narrowly missed out on the 2018 roster and will be eager to contribute this time around. Jovani Welch is another player who will hope to make a difference in the midfield, moving back to South American club soccer after a brief return to Panama.

DEFENSE

Two very familiar players will man the outside positions of Panama's defense. Left back Éric Davis has represented Panama since 2010 and is one of the few players based in the nation's domestic league still being considered for the national team, with manager Thomas Christiansen pushing players to find clubs

MACIEK GUDRYMOWICZ/ISI PHOTOS/GETTY IMAGES

abroad where they will be challenged. On the right side, Michael Amir Murillo has done just that, moving from Marseille (France) to Besiktas (Türkiye) in the winter but continuing to play in a high-quality European league after making the jump in 2020.

Between those fullbacks, Panama is able to choose from several physical center backs. Fidel Escobar played for Panama in the 2018 tournament, but Andrés Andrade will hope to make his World Cup debut. The left-footed center back has made his home in Austria with stopovers in Germany. Panama had to do without Carlos Harvey for much of World Cup qualification because of injury, so getting the versatile defender back is a huge boost. Generally a defender for his national team even as he plays in the midfield with his club, Harvey's determination to stop opponents make him a manager's favorite.

MICHAEL AMIR MURILLO

GOALKEEPER

Orlando Mosquera has become Panama's No. 1 goalkeeper, honing his game week-in, week-out in the Saudi Pro League where he plays against big-money attackers. He also came up big for Panama in World Cup qualification, with three clean sheets and only four goals allowed in the six final-round matches.

Mosquera displaced Luis Mejía, who debuted with Panama back in 2009 and has often been the starter. He now provides a reliable backup option, staying fresh by starting with Nacional in Uruguay.

The third keeper role is up in the air. It may be too soon for him, but Panamanian-American JD Gunn is in the mix and has an interesting story, having represented Panama at the U-18 level as a basketball player before switching to soccer full-time. César Samudio will go if Panama wants an option with more experience.

OFF THE BENCH

A veteran of the 2018 team, Alberto Quintero is still contributing for the national team at age 38. While he doesn't have the same level of speed as he did at the last tournament, his experience allows him to give a change of pace option. Azarias Londono also will be considered if Panama needs a playmaker late in a match. Tomas Rodriguez is a potential number 9 off the bench, having scored in each of Panama's three Gold Cup group matches last summer—though he saw limited action in World Cup qualification. César Blackman will provide fullback depth, while Edgardo Fariña is another option in central defense.

COACH AND STYLE

Christiansen measures up his team against its opponent before deciding the best way to proceed, meaning we'll likely see a defensive game plan for group matches against Croatia and England, but he may be tempted to play a more open game against Ghana in the first contest to see if the team can get some early points and nice momentum.

KEVIN ABELE/ICON SPORTSWIRE VIA GETTY IMAGES

GROUP L

MATCH DAYS

GAME 1
- → Wednesday, June 17 vs. Ghana
- → BMO Field, Toronto
- → 7 pm ET

GAME 2
- → Tuesday, June 23 vs. Croatia
- → BMO Field, Toronto
- → 7 pm ET

GAME 3
- → Saturday, June 27 vs. England
- → MetLife Stadium, New York/New Jersey
- → 5 pm ET

PROJECTED STARTING XI

G	ORLANDO MOSQUERA
D	MICHAEL AMIR MURILLO
D	FIDEL ESCOBAR
D	CARLOS HARVEY
D	ANDRÉS ANDRADE
D	ÉRIC DAVIS
MF	ISMAEL DÍAZ
MF	CHRISTIAN MARTÍNEZ
MF	ADALBERTO CARRASQUILLA
MF	ÉDGAR YOEL BÁRCENAS
F	JOSÉ FAJARDO

WHAT TO EXPECT

Panama was hoping to avoid another difficult draw, but once again sees a daunting group. There's England again (they beat Panama 6-1 in 2018), plus usual World Cup over-achievers Croatia and always-challenging Ghana. While Panama has cemented their status as the best CONCACAF team outside North America, it's difficult to see Christiansen and Co. getting out of the group.

EGYPT

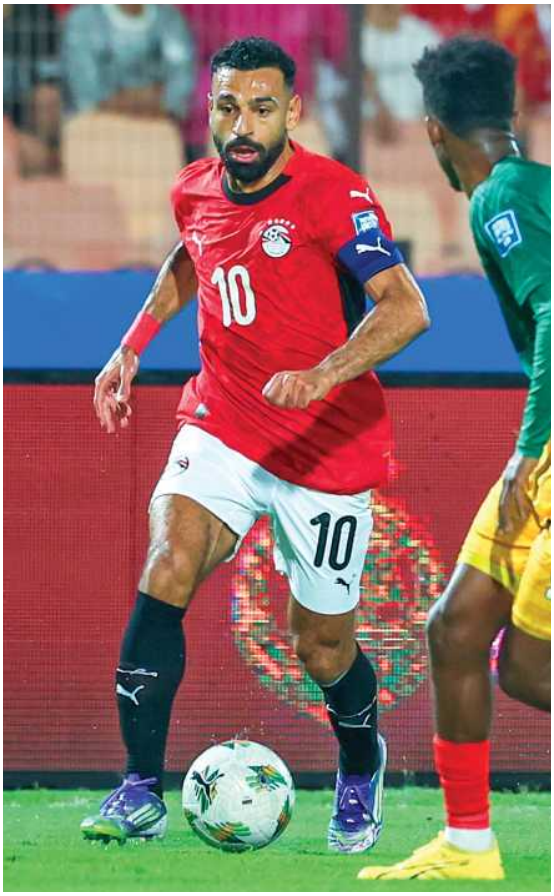
2026 WORLD CUP PREDICTION
ROUND OF 32

CAPITAL: CAIRO • POPULATION: 107.8 MILLION • SOCCER = KURAT AL-QADAM • FIRST WORLD CUP: 1934
NATIONAL TEAM NICKNAME: THE PHAROAHS • WORLD CUP APPEARANCES: 4

Known as The Pharaohs, the Egyptian national team boasts a rich history of continental success, including seven Africa Cup of Nations titles, making them the most decorated nation in that tournament's history. Despite this, World Cup campaigns have largely been disappointing, with the team never advancing past the group stage. In fact, in three previous appearances —1934, 1990, and 2018— Egypt has yet to win a World Cup match. With their draw in 2026, however, there are great hopes of breaking that streak.

The current Pharaohs squad is led by Hossam Hassan, appointed in February 2024 to replace Rui Vitória. A legendary former striker and Egypt's all-time top scorer, Hassan brings both tactical knowledge and firsthand World Cup experience to the side. His leadership, combined with his deep understanding of Egyptian football, has inspired a mix of discipline, attacking intent, and resilience in the squad.

In recent AFCON tournaments, Egypt has been highly competitive. Most recently, in Morocco, they finished fourth, losing to Nigeria on penalties in the bronze medal playoff. This result, while disappointing, showed the Pharaohs' consistency and mental toughness, and serves as a reminder that Egypt remains a major force on the continent.



MOHAMED SALAH

AYMAN AREF/NURPHOTO VIA GETTY IMAGES

FORWARDS

The attacking spearhead is Mohamed Salah, arguably Egypt's greatest modern player. His speed, dribbling, and finishing remain world-class, and his experience in the Premier League with Liverpool provides invaluable leadership. With the Reds, Salah has had a legendary career, twice winning Premier League Player of the Year honors and twice leading in goals. His 32 goals in 2017-18 set a 38-game Premier League record, and he is Liverpool's top Premier League goalscorer ever. Salah's ability to score in crucial moments makes him the central figure in Egypt's attacking strategy.

Given that teams will be laser-focused on Salah from the opening whistle, providing him with support and relieving defense pressure is key to Egypt's attack. In those roles, look for wingers like Omar Marmoush (Manchester City) and strikers such as Mostafa Mohamed, who plays for Nantes in France, and Zizo from Al Ahly in Egypt. They'll hope to bring pace, creativity, and versatility. Egypt often sets up with a lone central striker supported by wide forwards, allowing Salah the freedom to exploit spaces between defenders. The Pharaohs' attack thrives on quick transitions, often moving from defense to goal in just a few passes, reflecting a counterattacking philosophy that has been effective in AFCON qualifiers and friendlies alike. During qualifying, Salah led the way with nine of the team's 20 goals as they went undefeated in their six-team group.

Set pieces also remain an important weapon for Egypt, with wide forwards and strikers capable of scoring from corners or free kicks. Their ability to combine individual brilliance with collective movement makes them dangerous in tight matches.

MIDFIELD

Egypt's midfield blends creativity, control, and defensive cover. Hamdy Fathy anchors the midfield, providing balance and protecting the backline. Complementing him might be Trézeguét, an experienced playmaker currently at Al Ahly, who previously played for Anderlecht (Netherlands), Aston Villa (Premier League), and Trabzonspor (Türkiye). Trézeguét can also move to the forward line in attack, and overall brings vision, tactical intelligence, and leadership, making him a vital figure in both offense and defense.

Another key figure is Emam Ashour, currently at Al Ahly, who previously featured for Zamalek (Egypt) and FC Midtjylland (Denmark). Ashour adds energy, passing range, and the ability to break opposition lines, linking defense and attack effectively. Add in Marwan Attia from Ajax Amsterdam and Salah has a strong backing crew. As with every team, the midfield's primary role is to control tempo, retain possession, and feed forwards efficiently. Egypt's balance between defensive coverage and creative distribution was critical in their recent AFCON campaigns, helping the team navigate tight games against Morocco, Senegal, and Nigeria.

OMAR MARMOUSH

AYMAN AREF/NURPHOTO VIA GETTY IMAGES

DEFENSE

Egypt boasts one of Africa's most experienced defensive setups. The backline is led by reliable center backs Ramy Rabia from Al Ain (United Arab Emirates) and Yasser Ibrahim (Al Ahly) , and flanked by Mohamed Hany, also from Al Ain, and Ahmed Fatouh, providing both width and defensive discipline. The defense is organized, physically imposing, and tactically flexible. Together, they allowed only two goals in 10 games during World Cup qualifying. If they can provide that kind of success at the World Cup, Salah might only need one moment of magic to send them to the knockouts.

GOALKEEPER

Mohamed El Shenawy remains Egypt's No. 1 goalkeeper, providing calm authority and excellent shot-stopping. His experience domestically and internationally ensures reliability between the posts, while his leadership helps organize the backline. Backup goalkeepers Oufa Shobeir, also playing for Al Ahly (his father was a famous Al Ahly player and now a TV sports presenter), and Mohamed Sobhi provide reliable cover, ensuring security in this critical position.

OFF THE BENCH

Egypt has a strong bench capable of providing tactical flexibility. Young attackers like Ibrahim Adel, who won the African Champions League with Pyramids FC (Egypt), and Karim Fouad offer pace, energy, and creativity off the bench. Midfield options like Amr Warda allow Hassan to adjust formations mid-game, providing versatility during the group stage and potential knockout matches.

COACH AND STYLE

Hassan emphasizes a balanced, disciplined approach. Egypt generally plays a 4-2-3-1, allowing midfielders to shield the defense while supporting fast breaks and attacking movements. Hassan's team is capable of shifting to a 4-3-3 or more defensive 5-3-2 depending on the opposition. Hassan combines structured defense with counter-attacking efficiency. Players are drilled in positioning, pressing, and space coverage, while forwards like Salah exploit transitional moments.

GROUP G

MATCH DAYS

GAME 1
- → Monday, June 15 vs. Belgium
- → Lumen Field, Seattle
- → 3 pm ET

GAME 2
- → Sunday, June 21 vs. New Zealand
- → BC Place Vancouver
- → 9 pm ET

GAME 3
- → Friday, June 26 vs. Iran
- → Lumen Field, Seattle
- → 11 pm ET

PROJECTED STARTING XI

GK	MOHAMED EL SHENAWY
D	AHMED FATOUH
D	RAMY RABIA
D	YASSER IBRAHIM
D	MOHAMED HANY
MF	MARWAN ATTIA
MF	HOSSAM ABDELMAGUID
MF	HAMDY FATHY
MF	EMAM ASHOUR
F	MOHAMED SALAH
F	OMAR MARMOUSH

WHAT TO EXPECT

Egypt will be extremely well-organized and difficult to break down. Expect disciplined defensive setups, strategic counter-attacks, and reliance on Salah's individual brilliance in critical moments. Under Hassan's leadership, the Pharaohs have both the experience and tactical flexibility to make history for their country. Games against Iran and New Zealand (if not Belgium) offer hope for points to move forward.

ALGERIA

2026 WORLD CUP PREDICTION
ROUND OF 32

CAPITAL: ALGIERS • POPULATION: 47.8 MILLION • SOCCER = KURAT AL-QADAM • FIRST WORLD CUP: 1982
NATIONAL TEAM NICKNAME: LES FENNECS • WORLD CUP APPEARANCES: 5

Returning to the World Cup for the first time in 12 years, Algeria arrives with their confidence intact following a strong qualifying campaign and a run to the quarterfinals of the recent Africa Cup of Nations. Experienced Bosnian coach Vladimir Petković will hope that lingering bad taste is channeled into positive energy, allowing his team to build on an excellent World Cup qualifying campaign featuring eight victories and 24 goals scored in 10 games.

The team will have to rely on fighting spirit and collective organization more than world-class talent, with the notable exception of iconic forward Riyad Mahrez. The captain has already announced he will retire from international soccer after this tournament, and Mahrez would love to cement his status as one of Algeria's all-time greats by inspiring progression into the knockout rounds.

RAYAN AIT-NOURI

FORWARDS

The presence of Mahrez gives Algeria elite quality at the point of the attack, and he is by no means the only player capable of causing problems for opposition defenses. Ever since exploding onto the scene by inspiring Leicester City's improbable Premier League triumph a decade ago, Mahrez has made a stellar career out of classily cutting inside from the right wing to threaten the goal with his left foot. And that role can be replicated on the other flank by rising star Adil Boulbina, who made his international debut last year and is pushing hard for a starting spot after an excellent season with Qatari club Al Duhail.

Through the middle, the attack is spearheaded by Mohamed Amoura, the leading scorer during qualifying with 10 goals. Amoura's lack of size is compensated by razor-sharp reflexes in front of the goal and a tireless work ethic all over the pitch. And with further options provided by versatile duo Ibrahim Maza and Amine Gouiri, plus recent squad addition Farès Ghedjemis, there's plenty of depth in Algeria's forward line.

Ultimately, though, the key is Mahrez. Now 35 and lacking the electric change of pace of his peak, he is nonetheless an inspirational performer and a goalscoring threat. If he's up to the job, Algeria can be very dangerous.

MIDFIELD

A key figure in Algeria's engine room is Farès Chaïbi, a technically proficient orchestrator who combines a strong work ethic with speed of thought and astute passing, while also offering the versatility to play wide if Petković prefers to stack the center with more rugged players. Chief among those is Ismaël Bennacer, who sprang to global prominence when he was named player of the tournament in Algeria's triumphant 2019 Africa Cup of Nations campaign. Those performances earned a move to AC Milan, where he continued to prove his class by remaining a regular for six seasons. Alongside him, more grit is provided by the physically imposing Ramiz Zerrouki, with competition coming from the experienced pair of Hicham Boudaoui and Nabil Bentaleb.

To add more attacking threat, Algeria can call upon the playmaking prowess of Houssem Aouar. The 27-year-old has become a star in Saudi Arabia with impressive club performances for powerhouse Al-Ittihad. Aouar will be anxious to make up for lost time after missing the recent Africa Cup of Nations through injury. He will compete for time in the number-10 spot with Anis Hadj Moussa, who is coming off a strong season with Dutch giant Feyenoord.

RICHARD PELHAM - FIFA/FIFA VIA GETTY IMAGES

DEFENSE

The star of Algeria's defensive line is Rayan Aït-Nouri, whose performances in his first season with Manchester City have established him as one of the best left-backs in the world. The 24-year-old's ability to carry the ball at pace makes him an invaluable link between defense and attack, while also using tenacious tackling to remain a key part of the back four.

In the middle, Aïssa Mandi is the leader. The most-capped player in Algerian history, Mandi has great aerial ability and anticipation to go along with his vast experience, and he was the only player to start every game during World Cup qualifying. His likely central defensive partner, Ramy Bensebaini, is also a highly seasoned performer, fast approaching 100 international appearances.

At right back, look for the emerging talent of Rafik Belghali, who has toughened up in this season with the Italian team Hellas Verona.

RIYAD MAHREZ

KENZO TRIBOUILLARD/AFP VIA GETTY IMAGES

GOALKEEPER

A famous name can be found between the posts in the form of Luca Zidane, the son of Zinedine, an international star for France. Luca qualifies to represent Algeria through his grandparents, and switched allegiances from his birth country, France, less than a year ago. He was immediately installed as the No. 1 keeper for the Africa Cup of Nations, and performed well enough to retain that status. An agile and athletic player capable of making spectacular saves, Zidane's club career was initially hindered by a worrying propensity for basic errors. These have thankfully become less common in recent years, and that must remain the case this summer.

OFF THE BENCH

A fresh alternative could be provided by creative midfielder Adil Aouchiche, who has recently become eligible for Algeria after initially representing France in youth internationals. The 23-year-old product of Paris Saint-Germain's development system earned his first call-up in March; depending on how he does in that trial, his dribbling skills could offer a valuable element of surprise if coach Petković decides to throw him into the fray.

In contrast to his emerging talent, an intriguing question heading into the tournament is whether Petković will recall the country's all-time leading scorer, Islam Slimani. The 37-year-old was not selected for the Africa Cup of Nations but has repeatedly insisted he remains available for the national team. Giving him one final fling in the World Cup would be a wonderful way to end a legendary career.

COACH AND STYLE

Petković is a highly experienced coach, proving his worth on the international stage with seven years in charge of Switzerland, achieving a final-eight berth in the 2020 European Championship. The 62-year-old Bosnian favors an attacking style and an intense, hard-working approach off the ball.

GROUP J

MATCH DAYS

GAME 1
- → Tuesday, June 16 vs. Argentina
- → Arrowhead Stadium, Kansas City
- → 9 pm ET

GAME 2
- → Monday, June 22 vs. Jordan
- → Levi's Stadium, San Francisco

GAME 3
- → Saturday, June 27 vs. Austria
- → Arrowhead Stadium, Kansas City
- → 10 pm ET

PROJECTED STARTING XI

GK	LUCA ZIDANE
D	RAFIK BELGHALI
D	AÏSSA MANDI
D	RAMY BENSEBAINI
D	RAYAN AÏT-NOURI
MF	HOUSSEM AOUAR
MF	ISMAËL BENNACER
MF	RAMIZ ZERROUKI
MF	FARÈS CHAÏBI
F	RIYAD MAHREZ
F	MOHAMED AMOURA

WHAT TO EXPECT

The dubious privilege of first facing reigning champion Argentina is followed by a must-win meeting with Jordan. That should decide whether Algeria is still in contention by the time they wrap a tough group by taking on dangerous Austria, which likely will decide second place. Progressing any further would be a triumph in itself, allowing Petković's team to approach the knockout rounds with a "nothing to lose" attitude.

SWEDEN

2026 WORLD CUP PREDICTION
ROUND OF 16

CAPITAL: STOCKHOLM • POPULATION: 10.6 MILLION • SOCCER = FOTBOLL • FIRST WORLD CUP: 1934
NATIONAL TEAM NICKNAME: BLÅGULT• WORLD CUP APPEARANCES: 13

Better late than never is the motto for Sweden, which failed to win a single game in its qualifying group but still progressed into the playoffs thanks to its UEFA Nations League ranking. Manager Graham Potter's team made the most of that contrived reprieve by comfortably beating Ukraine and then edging out Poland in a 3-2 thriller, securing an unlikely and fortuitous passage to the summer showpiece.

Clearly, there is much room for improvement. A record of no wins, two draws, and four defeats from the initial qualifying group suggests that Sweden should not have too much confidence this summer. But this squad has great potential, especially with a superstar forward pairing of Viktor Gyökeres and Alexander Isak that could become one of the toughest strike duos in the world. Potter can call on plenty of emerging young talent; he has undoubtedly made the team better since being appointed in October.

If the recent rate of improvement can be maintained, Sweden could become one of the strangest World Cup stories of recent years and the source of a tantalizing trivia question: the team that failed to win a single game in its qualifying group but still progressed deep into the knockout stages of the main event.

VICTOR LINDELÖF

FORWARDS

Sweden would probably not even be going to the World Cup without Gyökeres, who fired a hat trick in the playoff semifinal against Ukraine and had a late winner in the victory over Poland. Coming off a generally impressive first Premier League season with Arsenal, Gyökeres is both a hard worker and a prolific goalscorer, and his importance to the national team is unmatched.

Fitness permitting, he will be joined by the potentially world-beating talents of Isak. Dazzling and frustrating in equal measure, the Liverpool (Premier League) striker oozes class but struggles for consistency. He also missed the majority of a difficult first season at Liverpool through injury, making it impossible to predict how much he will be able to contribute this summer: he could be a peripheral presence as he works his way back to full fitness and game rhythm, or he could be a rampaging menace who is physically fresher than opposing defenders fatigued by a demanding club season. If it's the latter, watch out.

The key source of ammunition is Anthony Elanga, a versatile creator equally comfortable operating as a central support or in a wider role. Elanga joined Manchester United at the age of 12 and has stayed in England ever since, but his confidence could be affected by a below-par season with Newcastle United.

MIDFIELD

The link between midfield and attack is provided by Benjamin Nygren, who has quickly nailed down a starting spot since first breaking into the team last year. The 24-year-old has showed his goalscoring prowess during a successful first club campaign with Scottish titan Celtic, surpassing 20 goals.

Defensive protection is provided by Jesper Karlström, who keeps things simple and rarely strays too far forward. Alongside him, Yasin Ayari is yet another of Sweden's emerging young talents. He has greatly impressed for Brighton & Hove Albion (Premier League) and looks set to become Sweden's key midfield general.

Further depth comes from Mattias Svanberg, who has been in and out of the team for years, while Lucas Bergvall and Besfort Zeneli are a pair of young players hoping to make a mark this summer.

DEFENDERS

The linchpin of the back line is Victor Lindelöf, a vastly experienced central defender who spent eight years in the pressure-cooker environment of Manchester United before moving to Aston Villa last year.

MICHAEL CAMPANELLA/GETTY IMAGES

Lindelöf is a rare thirty-something in a youthful squad, so his deep experience of big occasions will be valuable as he leads his team on and off the field.

Alongside him, Gabriel Gudmundsson has the versatility to play either at left back or more centrally in Potter's preferred back three defensive formation. Comfortable on the ball, Gudmundsson's passing ability also makes him a catalyst for much of the team's attacking play. Assuming he recovers from a hamstring injury which kept him out of March's playoffs, the central trio will be completed by Isak Hien, who has captained the team on a few occasions and can also play as a right back.

BENJAMIN NYGREN

Cover in the middle is provided by Carl Starfelt or Gustaf Lagerbielke, who also gives a goalscoring threat from set-pieces. Daniel Svensson and Emil Krafth also offer the versatility to switch positions between defense and midfield, a highly prized attribute in Potter's tactically fluid approach.

GOALKEEPER

Goalkeeper has been a problem position for Sweden in recent years, with four different starters used during the qualifying process. For March's triumphant playoffs, three of those were discarded and the man between the posts was also the oldest player on the roster, 36-year-old Kristoffer Nordfeldt. Neither of the backups—Nöel Tornqvist and Melker Ellborg—have played even a minute of international football, so Sweden will cross its fingers for Nordfelt's health.

OFF THE BENCH

An intriguing attacking option is Roony Bardghji, a gifted 20-year-old winger who made a promising impression with Spanish giant Barcelona this season and debuted for the national team last October. His time as a key player for Sweden will undoubtedly come, and this summer could be the perfect launchpad. Gustav Lundgren, a tall and powerful winger with a goalscoring knack, is a recent addition to the squad despite not making his international debut until the age of 30. And if there's a need to rest key striker Gyökeres, Alexander Bernhardsson could be a useful attacking presence despite still awaiting his first international goal.

COACH AND STYLE

Englishman Potter is a familiar figure to Swedish football fans since starting his coaching career with a hugely successful spell at club side Östersund. After several appointments in England with mixed success—notably at Chelsea—he returned to Sweden with the national team last October. Although he generally favors a three-man defense and a possession-based approach, Potter also preaches tactical flexibility and isn't afraid to drastically change styles.

LUKASZ GERMANIUK/EURASIA SPORT IMAGES/GETTY IMAGES

GROUP F

MATCH DAYS

GAME 1
- → Sunday, June 14 vs. Tunisia
- → Estadio Monterrey, Monterrey
- → 10 pm ET

GAME 2
- → Saturday, June 20 vs. Netherlands
- → NRG Stadium, Houston
- → 1 pm ET

GAME 3
- → Thursday, June 25 vs. Japan
- → AT&T Stadium, Arlington
- → 7 pm ET

PROJECTED STARTING XI

GK	KRISTOFFER NORDFELDT
D	ISAK HIEN
D	VIKTOR LINDELÖF
D	GABRIEL GUDMUNDSSON
MF	DANIEL SVENSSON
MF	JESPER KARLSTRÖM
MF	YASIN AYARI
MF	BENJAMIN NYGREN
F	ANTHONY ELANGA
F	VIKTOR GYÖKERES
F	ALEXANDER ISAK

WHAT TO EXPECT

From Sweden, it's probably best to expect the unexpected. Surprisingly poor during a winless qualifying group phase, the team belatedly burst into life to prevail in the playoffs. Group F is arguably the most challenging to navigate. But if everything clicks, great things could be in store. However, a sorry group stage elimination is just as probable, and Sweden is perhaps the most unpredictable team at the tournament.

CZECHIA

2026 WORLD CUP PREDICTION
ROUND OF 32

CAPITAL: PRAGUE • POPULATION: 10.5 MILLION • SOCCER = FOTBAL • FIRST WORLD CUP: 2006
NATIONAL TEAM NICKNAME: NÁROD'ÁK• WORLD CUP APPEARANCES: 2

In 2006, at only 14 years old as a nation, the Czech Republic (called Czechia by FIFA, so we'll go with that from now on) earned its first World Cup bid. It entered with high hopes, ranked No. 2 in the world. But after dusting off the US team 3-0, it fell to Ghana and Italy and went home far earlier than expected. For the next 20 years, a nation with high hopes then watched impatiently for their team to get another shot on the world's biggest soccer stage. With a dramatic late-March win in penalty kicks over Denmark in a UEFA playoff, those fans finally got their wish. Czechia earned its second-ever World Cup bid.

However, the country's World Cup DNA includes its past as part of Czechoslovakia, which played in eight World Cups and finished runner-up twice (1930 and 1962). That nation split in 1992 to become Slovakia and the Czech Republic (not Czechia at the time). Two decades after its first try, today's Czechia has a chance to make its own history to make in North America.

To do so, they have to tighten up a defense that gave up eight goals in UEFA group qualifying games. In fact, the national organization was so disappointed by the team's qualifying efforts (they lost 2-1 to—gasp!—the Faroe Islands!) that manager Ivan Hasek was sacked in December, and 74-year-old Miroslav Koubek was brought on to right the ship. He was successful, leading the team to a pair of wins over tiny countries, and then the two playoff wins. However, both of those UEFA contests (vs. Ireland and Denmark) ended in penalties, and in the ultimate game, Czechia led Denmark 2-1 before giving up a late tying goal. There is some firepower up front, but Czechia will rise or fall at the back line.

LADISLAV KREJCI

CHRISTIAN HOFER - UEFA/UEFA VIA GETTY IMAGES

FORWARDS

The attack is three-pronged, with speedy Pavel Schick at striker, joined by Pavel Sulc and Lukás Provod usually playing off his shoulders on each side. The latter pair are listed as midfielders, but their role is to focus on the attack. Schick led the team with five goals in qualifying; no surprise as he was among the top scorers in 2025-26 for Bayer Leverkusen (Germany). At 30, he's a bit of a late bloomer; will his experience shine on the big stage? Sulc, meanwhile, is a star on the rise, moving from the Czech League to Lyon in France this past season and putting in 11 goals in 22 games. Provod provides more support than scoring punch; he's among the Czech League leaders in assists.

MIDFIELD

The veteran Tomás Soucek anchors the midfield. At 31, he has more than 89 appearances for his nation, most among current players and tenth most all-time among Czechs (seventh among Czechia-only players). He's also a four-time Czech Footballer of the Year. The veteran has played his pro ball for West Ham United (Premier League) since 2020, so he's suffered through this past very disappointing season, while starting most games. He has the veteran leadership Czechia will need at this tournament, along with size to help on set pieces in front of goal. In fact, watch for set pieces from this team. They scored both their goals against Denmark during set pieces, and boast a stack of tall players, led by 6-6 backup forward Tomás Chory.

Vladimír Coufal and Jaroslav Zeleny are listed as defenders, but play in more of a wingback position on the right and left, respectively. They can easily drop back to give the team a five-wide defensive wall, but both are skilled and fast

enough to advance in support of the central midfielders. Coufal, a former West Ham teammate of Soucek, has been around the block in 14 club seasons in three countries. He's especially strong at crosses and is one of the team's main free-kick takers; his work set up one of the goals against Denmark. Zeleny tops him with 18 seasons, though all of his were in Czech leagues, lately with Sparta Praha. The pair's experience will prove vital to keeping Czechia from letting up when facing teams they should beat.

TOMÁS SOUCEK

DEFENSE

At 26, center back Robin Hranac is coming into his own. After several years in Czech leagues, he moved to the German Bundesliga in 2024 and by this past season was a starter for Hoffenheim. He's not the biggest center back around, but has speed and height. He is ably supported by team captain Ladislav Krejci, also 26 but with experience in Spain and this past season in the Premier League. Krejci loves to move up with the offense, and will often be seen in the opponent's penalty area (in fact, he scored against Ireland and Denmark in March). The other fullback, Stepan Chaloupek, is only 22, so he will lean on his veteran teammates for help.

GOALKEEPER

Matej Kovar started all eight of the team's qualifying games, so he's clearly the trusted pair of hands. At 6-5, he covers a lot of space. He has top-level experience at PSV (Netherlands), but had given up more than a goal a game in league play through March. The those qualifying games were his first on the international level. He will have to come up big in the crucible of the World Cup for Czechia to advance. Young Lukas Hornicek of Braga (Portugal) is his backup.

OFF THE BENCH

In the Denmark game, Koubek called on a trio of younger forwards: Chory, Michal Sadilek, and Mojmír Chytil, so he clearly trusts them to provide fresh legs. Chory, in fact, started the team's first playoff game against Ireland. Along with the young trio up front, Lukás Cerv has seen regular action starting and coming off the bench in midfield. Adam Karabeck can also spell starters in midfield.

COACH AND STYLE

Prior to taking over Czechia, Koubek spent most of his career in Czech leagues. After his team beat Ireland to set up the Denmark game, he said. "The mental side—the commitment, the fight, the work they put into the match—I think that got pushed a bit into the background, but it was the biggest factor in our win." He's right. Czechia will have to dig deeper than its talent currently shows to advance far. But Koubek is undefeated so far; maybe he has the answers.

MICHAL CIZEK/AFP VIA GETTY IMAGES

GROUP A

MATCH DAYS

GAME 1
- → Thursday, June 11 vs. South Korea
- → Estadio Akron, Guadalajara
- → 7 pm ET

GAME 2
- → Thursday, June 18 vs. South Africa
- → Mercedes-Benz Stadium, Atlanta
- → Noon ET

GAME 3
- → Wednesday, June 24 vs. Mexico
- → Estadio Azteca, Mexico City
- → 9 pm ET

PROJECTED STARTING XI

GK	MATEJ KOVAR
D	ROBIN HRANÁC
D	LADISLAV KREJCÍ
D	STEPÁN CHALOUPEK
MF	JAROSLAV ZELENY
MF	VLADIMÍR DARIDA
MF	TOMÁS SOUCEK
MF	VLADIMÍR COUFAL
MF	LUKÁS PROVOD
F	PAVEL SULC
F	PATRIK SCHICK

WHAT TO EXPECT

Given the possible obstacles, Czechia's playoff victory put them in a pretty good group to advance from. Though they will face Mexico in a packed and noisy Azteca Stadium, they'll have a good chance to put up points against South Korea and South Africa. Look for the sophomores at the World Cup to move to the Round of 32 out of their group. After that, the matchups will matter, but Round of 16 is not out of the question.

TÜRKIYE

2026 WORLD CUP PREDICTION
ROUND OF 32

CAPITAL: ANKARA • POPULATION: 87.9 MILLION • SOCCER = FUTBOL • FIRST WORLD CUP: 1954
NATIONAL TEAM NICKNAME: THE CRESCENT-STARS • WORLD CUP APPEARANCES: 3

After missing the last five World Cups, Türkiye's Crescent Stars will be shining again on soccer's global stage.

Türkiye qualified as one of four UEFA playoff survivors, beating both Romania and Kosovo by 1-0 scores to earn a spot in Group D of the 48-team World Cup. They'll face Australia, Paraguay, and tri-host USA in group play.

With a lineup that includes exciting, young offensive talents like 21-year-old Arda Güler of Spanish giant Real Madrid and 20-year Kenan Yildez of Italy's Juventus, veteran number 10 Hakan Çalhanoglu (Italy's Inter Milan), and skillful left back Ferdi Kadioglu (Premier League's Brighton & Hove Albion), plus hard-nosed defenders Merih Demiral (Saudi Arabia's Al-Ali) and Abdülkerim Bardakci (Türkiye's Galatasary), Türkiye has the makings of a squad that can finish on top of the group and advance deep into the knockout rounds.

It sounds ambitious, but when the Crescent Stars played in the World Cup in 2002 they reached the semifinals for the first time. They fell to eventual champion Brazil, 1-0, but came back and won the third-place match over co-host South Korea, 3-2, and returned home as heroes.

"Thank God. It has been 24 years," said game-winning goal scorer Kerem Akturkoglu on Turkish TV after the playoff triumph in Kosovo. "Some of us were not even born the last time we qualified, and some were too young to remember. We always dreamed of moments like this.

"We talked about 2002 and the success there, we always dreamed of it. Most of us don't even remember 2002. Now we will give the next generation something to dream about at the 2026 World Cup. We want to make our country proud."

Along with their UEFA playoff-group triumph, Türkiye can point to some solid games in the past year, including a 2-1 win over the United States, which they will face on June 25 in the crucial final game of group play. And while they beat Georgia, Romania, and Bulgaria in qualifying play, they were also stomped 6-0 by Spain. The answer for where Türkiye fits in is best defined by that mix of results—they have talent and the ability to win, but they have a ceiling. The World Cup will be a stern test of just what level that is.

ARDA GÜLER

SERHAT CAGDAS/ANADOLU VIA GETTY IMAGES

FORWARDS

When Güler, Yildiz, and Akturkoglu are running at the defense, they are a handful to contain. A rising star in world football, Güler is the heartbeat of the attack. He is good on the ball and has great vision, often combining with Yildiz for scoring opportunities. Güler is a rising star for Real Madrid, and caught the world's attention in March with a goal from 68 meters in a La Liga game, a goal that tied a league record for distance.

Yildiz is a tremendous 1v1 player on the left wing, creating chances and with the ability to get off a shot from the dribble or to send in a cross. He started the sequence that led to the winning goal against Kosovo, going at a defender in the box before laying the ball off to midfielder Orkun Kökçü, who shot it into the path of a crashing Akturkoglu, who tapped it in in the 53rd minute.

As he showed in the Kosovo win, defenses can't forget about Akturkoglu. Another scoring option is Baris Alper Yilmaz, who has international tournament experience, having played for Türkiye in the 2024 European Championships.

MIDFIELD

This is the area of the field that has the most experience, led by Çalhanoglu with 104 caps for his country. He made his national senior team debut in 2013 and has played in three Euros. Çalhanoglu excels in both attacking and holding positions; he is also a set-piece specialist. Kökçü, who has 48 caps, is an attacker. His pass to Güler set things in motion on the game-winning goal against Kosovo. Ismail Yüksek (31 caps) provides a physical presence in the midfield and works well with Çalhanoglu.

FERDI KADIOGLU

DEFENSE

Kadioglu probably racks up more meters on the pitch than anyone on the team. He brings a winger's attitude to his left back position, consistently moving into the attack and setting up scoring threats. Behind him are physical center backs Abdulkerim Bardakci and Ozan Kabak. Zeki Çeki, who plays at AS Roma, handles the defensive duties at right back and also likes to get up field and contribute to the attack.

GOALKEEPER

Ugurcan Çakur preserved Türkiye's World Cup dream by making an incredible diving save in the first half against Kosovo. He used his outstretched right arm to deflect an on-target shot onto the crossbar to keep the game scoreless. Çakur is a teammate of Bardakci at Galatasaray, a top Turkish squad, so their teamwork should be a plus in keeping the defense organized.

COACH AND STYLE

Italian Vincenzo Montella has the distinction of being the first Türkiye national team coach to take the team to the Euros and the World Cup. Before the playoff win to qualify for a trip to the US for the World Cup, Montella was told by Turkish Football Federation President Ibrahim Haciosmanoglu that he would be granted citizenship if the team qualified. The coach mentioned this in the post-game press conference.

"I feel like a Turk, I think like a Turk in every step I take. The passport is just a formality for me, I am always like a Turk," said Montella, who has been the national team coach since 2023.

He has turned his talented players loose on the pitch and they have responded. Yes, there have been some low points like that 6-0 loss at home against Spain. But the team turned things around in the second meeting, playing the European Champions to a 2-2 draw in Seville and finishing up in second place to gain a spot in the playoffs, which turned out well for them.

Which Türkiye squad will show up in the World Cup? Few teams enter this tournament with a wider swing of possible outcomes than this one. They have talent to advance, but can they put it all together when they need to?

YAGIZ GURTUG/NURPHOTO VIA GETTY IMAGES

GROUP D

MATCH DAYS

GAME 1
- → Saturday, June 13 vs. Australia
- → BC Place, Vancouver
- → Noon ET

GAME 2
- → Friday, June 19 vs. Paraguay
- → Levi's Stadium, Santa Clara
- → Midnight ET

GAME 3
- → Thursday, June 25 vs. United States
- → SoFi Stadium, Los Angeles
- → 10 pm ET

PROJECTED STARTING XI

GK	UGURCAN ÇAKUR
D	FERDI KADIOGLU
D	ZEKI ÇEKI
D	OZAN KABAK
D	ABDÜLKERIM BARDAKCI
MF	HAKAN ÇALHANOGLU
MF	ORKUN KÖKÇÜ
MF	ISMAIL YÜKSEK
F	ARDA GÜLER
F	KEREM AKTÜRKOGLU
F	KENAN YILDEZ

WHAT TO EXPECT

Group play offers some opportunity for points that Türkiye must take advantage of. First, they face Australia, five points lower on FIFA's world ranking. The Turkish team is even farther ahead of Paraguay. That means the game against the United States, in front of a pro-American crowd in Los Angeles might determine the group champion. By then, Türkiye will have shown that it has coalesced at the right time . . . or it has fallen back into bad habits.

BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA

2026 WORLD CUP PREDICTION
GROUP STAGE

CAPITAL: SARAJEVO • POPULATION: 3.1 MILLION • SOCCER = FUDBAL • FIRST WORLD CUP: 2014
NATIONAL TEAM NICKNAME: ZMAJEVI (THE DRAGONS) • WORLD CUP APPEARANCES: 2

Bosnia and Herzegovina's dramatic qualification for the World Cup Finals, at the expense of fallen giant Italy in March's playoff final penalty shootout, is already a major achievement for a nation of just 3.1 million people. Anything else this summer would be a bonus, so manager Sergej Barbarez's team can approach the tournament with a liberating sense of having nothing to lose.

The great subplot to this story is a last dance for iconic captain Edin Džeko, the 40-year-old striker who has inspired his country for the best part of two decades and tops the Dragons' all-time list in both goalscoring and appearances. Džeko aside, the squad is short on recognizably world-class talent, but the playoff final performance against Italy showed that resilience will not be lacking.

EDIN DZEKO

HUW FAIRCLOUGH/GETTY IMAGES

FORWARDS

Džeko has been synonymous with Bosnian football ever since he rose to superstar status during a goal-laden five-year spell with Manchester City. With more than 400 career goals to his name, Džeko—fondly known as "the Diamond" in his native land—is also an outstanding physical presence whose close control, aerial ability, and smooth touch allows him to hold up the ball for his teammates.

His established strike partner is Ermedin Demirović, a proven goalscorer in German club football over the past few seasons. The two work well together, with Džeko dropping deep to link play through his technical skills, while Demirović plays off the shoulder of the last defender, looking for space closer to goal.

Both Džeko and Demirović are six-foot-plus, making them a physical handful for any opposition and reflecting a key trait of coach Barbarez's approach: make yourselves uncomfortable and unpleasant to play against. In terms of goalscoring, though, the burden will fall mostly on Džeko, whose six group-stage goals made him the joint-fifth highest scorer in European qualifying.

MIDFIELD

The key supplier to Džeko and Demirović could be a fast-rising young star who was not born when his captain debuted for the team. Kerim Alajbegović is just 18 years old and has only made a handful of international appearances, but he's coming off an excellent club season with Austrian powerhouse RB Salzburg. A tall and skillful winger equally capable of creating and scoring, Alajbegović looks destined to become Džeko's heir as his country's most important player, and this summer will be our only chance to see them together.

Further back, Benjamin Tahirović is the chief source of stability in the center of the pitch, barely missing a game since making his international debut three years ago. Only 23, Tahirović's sense of responsibility was illustrated when he converted the first penalty in the crucial shootout against Italy. His regular partner is Ivan Šunjić, another six-footer who excels in maintaining the team's structure and protecting the back four. More emphasis on technique comes from Ivan Bašić, who is probably the team's best passer and will be called upon when Barbarez wants to command more possession.

Width—and a steady supply of crosses for Džeko and Demirović to attack—is provided by regular starters on the wing Amar Memić and Esmir Bajraktarević. The latter player has already written himself into Bosnian football history by scoring the playoff-winning penalty against Italy in March.

DEFENDERS

The cornerstone of the defensive line is Sead Kolašinac, the squad's only player other than Džeko with more than 50 international appearances.

The 32-year-old has spent the majority of his long and successful career as a powerful and aggressive central defender, but has recently appeared more often for the national team as a left back to add further solidity to the defense. Balancing that out on the right flank, Amar Dedić is important both for his defensive tenacity and ability to support the team's attacking play.

If Kolašinac stays on the left, the likely starting center backs are rapidly improving former under-21 captain Tarik Muharemović and the more experienced Nikola Katić. They are both—as with most members of this team—tall and physically strong performers, and gained great confidence in their partnership with excellent performances against Wales and Italy in March's qualifiers.

HARIS TABAKOVIC

GOALKEEPER

Nikola Vasilj provides an imposing and reassuring presence between the posts, showing his quality with a series of strong saves in the playoff final win over Italy. Vasilj played every second during the qualification process and has barely missed a club game during his five seasons with German team St. Pauli. His reliability is a vital foundation for Bosnia and Herzegovina, and his strong track record in saving penalties could prove crucial if his team advances to the knockout stages. Vasilj is also following a family tradition: his father Vladimir was a goalkeeper in the Croatia squad that reached the 1998 World Cup semifinals.

OFF THE BENCH

The giant figure of Haris Tabaković is the backup striker, sure to receive plenty of playing time this summer. He came off the bench to score the crucial late equalizer in the playoff final victory over Italy. Another regular substitute—and, in keeping with the team's overall style, another imposing physical presence—is Samed Baždar. In midfield, an additional dose of energy and drive can be provided by Armin Gigović and Amir Hadžiahmetović, who both appeared regularly during the qualifying campaign. Dženis Burnić is another who won't start many games but receives plenty of opportunities off the bench, helped by his ability to fills gaps in the defense when required.

COACH AND STYLE

Former forward and national team captain Barbarez—a three-time Bosnian footballer of the year—was appointed coach in April 2024, finally fulfilling a dream he first publicly expressed 15 years earlier. His pride at taking the role is reflected in the hard-nosed, committed style of the team he leads, similar to his own no-holds-barred approach on the field. Barbarez demands wholehearted physical effort and intensity, aiming to recreate the family atmosphere more often associated with club football. So far, he has certainly succeeded.

VISIONHAUS/GETTY IMAGES

GROUP B

MATCH DAYS

GAME 1
- → Friday, June 12 vs. Canada
- → BMO Field, Toronto
- → 3 pm ET

GAME 2
- → Thursday, June 18 vs. Switzerland
- → SoFi Stadium, Los Angeles
- → 3 pm ET

GAME 3
- → Wednesday, June 24 vs. Qatar
- → Lumen Field, Seattle
- → 3 pm ET

PROJECTED STARTING XI

GK	NIKOLA VASILJ
D	AMAR DEDIĆ
D	TARIK MUHAREMOVIĆ
D	NIKOLA KATIĆ
D	SEAD KOLAŠINAC
MF	ESMIR BAJRAKTAREVIĆ
MF	BENJAMIN TAHIROVIĆ
M	IVAN ŠUNJIĆ
M	KERIM ALAJBEGOVIĆ
F	EDIN DŽEKO
F	ERMEDIN DEMIROVIĆ

WHAT TO EXPECT

Bosnia and Herzegovina has the blessing of arguably the softest group at the World Cup, and winning the opening game against co-host Canada would be the perfect way to build confidence. Qatar is also an eminently beatable adversary, so finishing second in the group is a realistic target. That could set up a knockout tie against the Netherlands, but facing opposition of that caliber may prove too much.

PARAGUAY

GROUP D
2026 WORLD CUP PREDICTION
ROUND OF 32

CAPITAL: ASCUNIÓN • POPULATION: 6.2 MILLION • SOCCER = FUTBOL • FIRST WORLD CUP: 1930
NATIONAL TEAM NICKNAME: LOS GUARANÍES • WORLD CUP APPEARANCES: 9

After rolling through its 18 qualifying games with only four defeats—the same as Argentina, Colombia, and Uruguay, and two fewer than Brazil—it's clear that Paraguay, despite being unfancied by many, will have plenty of confidence in its ability to compete this summer.

The clear strength for Gustavo Alfaro's team is a rock-solid defense that conceded only 10 goals in those 18 games, keeping 10 clean sheets and allowing more than one goal on just two occasions. That defensive prowess needs to continue, because Paraguay is definitely not prolific at the other end of the field, averaging less than a goal per game during qualification (14 in 18). The team's cautious attacking play is epitomized by likely starting striker Antonio Sanabria, whose journeyman career with various mid-tier European clubs has been notable for running hard and working selflessly for his teammates rather than regular scoring.

GUSTAVO GÓMEZ

The squad is largely lacking in star power, with veteran playmaker Miguel Almirón probably the best-known player thanks to a long run with Newcastle United (Premier League), before returning for a second spell at MLS Atlanta United last year. Rugged central defender Omar Alderete is another familiar face after his time with Valencia (Spain) and Sunderland (Premier League), and there is genuine quality in the form of Diego Gómez. The versatile young midfielder first rose to prominence by capably supporting Lionel Messi at Inter Miami, and is now coming off a strong Premier League season with Brighton & Hove Albion.

Otherwise, coach Alfaro's men are largely little-known outside their own continent. The team's style is well summed up by captain Gustavo Gómez, a veteran central defender notable for a relentlessly focused and battle-hardened attitude, who has spent his entire career in South America aside from two modest seasons with AC Milan. Nevertheless, Gómez's leadership skills, commitment to the cause and ability to score powerful headers from set-pieces have made the 33-year-old a firm fan favorite at Brazilian club Palmeiras, where he played a key part in consecutive Copa Libertadores triumphs in 2020 and 2021.

The lack of household names certainly does not mean that Paraguay should be casually written off. *Los Guaraníes* lost just one of its final 12 qualifying games, beating powerhouses Brazil, Argentina, and Uruguay along the way. That kind of consistency does not happen by accident, and few teams will head into the World Cup with clearer ideas of how they intend to go about their business. That approach will include largely allowing the opposition to dictate the rhythm of the game—Paraguay only had 23 percent ball possession during its qualifying victory over Argentina—but, for Alfaro and his players, less can often be more.

MATCH DAYS

MATCH 1
→ Friday, June 12 vs. United States
→ SoFi Stadium, Los Angeles
→ 9 pm ET

MATCH 2
→ Friday, June 19 vs. Türkiye
→ Levi's Stadium, San Francisco
→ 12 am ET

MATCH 3
→ Thursday, June 25 vs. Australia
→ Levi's Stadium, San Francisco
→ 10 pm ET

PROJECTED STARTING XI

G	GATITO FERNÁNDEZ
D	JUAN CÁCERES
D	GUSTAVO GÓMEZ
D	OMAR ALDERETE
D	JÚNIOR ALONSO
MF	ANDRÉS CUBAS
MF	RAMÓN SOSA
MF	MIGUEL ALMIRÓN
MF	DIEGO GÓMEZ
F	JULIO ENCISO
F	ANTONIO SANABRIA

DIANA CARRILLO/EURASIA SPORT IMAGES/GETTY IMAGES

SCOTLAND

GROUP C
2026 WORLD CUP PREDICTION
GROUP STAGE

CAPITAL: EDINBURGH • POPULATION: 5.2 MILLION • SOCCER = FOOTBALL • FIRST WORLD CUP: 1954
NATIONAL TEAM NICKNAME: THE TARTAN ARMY (FANS) • WORLD CUP APPEARANCES: 9

Scotland ended a 28-year wait for qualification as Hampden Park was turned into a seething mass of unfettered jubilation. That was the narrative as Steve Clarke's close-knit group finally made it back to the top table of world football following late drama against Denmark. The ecstatic scenes at the end, with navy-shirted players freewheeling joyously around the pitch, and chaos in the stands after Kenny McLean netted from the halfway line in the dying seconds, forged memories that will be replayed in the minds of the Tartan Army forever more.

That's how much it meant to Scotland to reach their first appearance in the finals since France in 1998.

Now comes the hard part. Can Clarke carry the joy and hope of that day to the games in North America? Scotland have reached the European Championships twice under Clarke. But this was an achievement at a whole new level. And the World Cup draw was less than kind. Brazil and Morocco are daunting prospects. The Seleçao are five-time winners, and Scotland's North African opponents reached the last four in Qatar in 2022.

However, Haiti are Scotland's first opponents and if the Scots are to progress—basically as one of the best third-place teams—victory in that game is a must.

To meet those challenges, Clarke has several A-listers to call upon. Chief among them is Scott McTominay, who was voted as Serie A's best last year with Napoli (Italy). Aston Villa (Premier League) midfielder John McGinn is plying his trade at the very highest level. Billy Gilmour forms part of a midfield alongside McTominay and McGinn that oozes class.

On defense, Liverpool's Andrew Robertson provides veteran leadership, with an assist from Aaron Hickey, based on his solid experience at Brentford (Premier League).

Angus Gunn, despite the lack of playing time at Leeds United, is a solid pair of hands in goal.

If Scotland do struggle, it's in front of goal where the club is not blessed with creative talent. However, players such as Ché Adams, Ryan Christie, and Lewis Ferguson are ready to step up.

The lack of depth in the squad could hurt Clarke, too. Although he will take that if it means the country can progress through to the knockout stages. That would be a major landmark with a group of players whose big achievement was to bury the ghosts of the last 28 years.

With the Tartan Army ready to launch a mini-invasion, they'll have a good time regardless—although the canny Clarke will be secretly hoping for more than a giant party to numb the pain of an early exit.

SCOTT McTOMINAY

ANDREW MILLIGAN/PA IMAGES VIA GETTY IMAGES

MATCH DAYS

MATCH 1
→ Saturday, June 13 vs. Haiti
→ Gillette Stadium, Boston
→ 9 pm ET

MATCH 2
→ Friday, June 19 vs. Morocco
→ Gillette Stadium, Boston
→ 6 pm ET

MATCH 3
→ Wednesday, June 24 vs. Brazil
→ Hard Rock Stadium, Miami
→ 6 pm ET

PROJECTED STARTING XI

G Angus Gunn	D Kieran Tierney	F Ryan Christie
D Aaron Hickey	MF Scott McTominay	F Lewis Ferguson
D Grant Hanley	MF Billy Gilmour	F Ché Adams
D Scott McKenna	MF John McGinn	

CÔTE D'IVOIRE

GROUP E
2026 WORLD CUP PREDICTION
ROUND OF 32

CAPITAL: YAMOUSSOUKRO • POPULATION: 33 MILLION • SOCCER = LE FOOTBALL • FIRST WORLD CUP: 2006
NATIONAL TEAM NICKNAME: LES ÉLÉPHANTES • WORLD CUP APPEARANCES: 4

Côte d'Ivoire heads into the 2026 World Cup with renewed belief, momentum and a growing sense of purpose. After years of rebuilding following a golden generation era, the Elephants now arrive with a squad that blends youth, experience, and identity. This is no longer a team in transition but this is a team ready to compete and make history.

In qualifying, the team topped Group F, showcasing dominance and defensive discipline throughout. They scored 25 goals and remarkably conceded none.

SEKO FOFANA

Leading the attack is striker Sébastien Haller. Although he missed the most recent AFCON in Morocco due to a hamstring injury, Haller remains the focal point of this team when fully fit. He brings physical presence, composure, and a clinical edge in front of goal. If he returns at full fitness, he will once again be the main reference point in attack.

Alongside him is Evan Guessand, who adds mobility, energy, and versatility across the frontline. His ability to stretch defenses and link play makes him an important complement to Haller's more traditional striker role.

Supporting the attack is an exciting group of wide players. Amad Diallo brings flair, creativity, and technical quality. His close control and ability to operate in tight spaces make him a dangerous weapon, particularly against compact defenses. Another rising name is Yan Diomande, a player in top form and attracting interest from major European clubs. His pace, confidence, and directness give Côte d'Ivoire a fresh attacking dimension.

In midfield, Côte d'Ivoire maintain a powerful and balanced core. Captain Franck Kessié continues to lead by example. His strength, leadership, and ability to influence both ends of the pitch make him indispensable. Alongside him, Ibrahim Sangaré provides defensive stability, shielding the backline and winning key duels. Seko Fofana completes the trio with dynamic, box-to-box presence.

Defensively, the squad has developed a solid and reliable structure. The central defensive partnership of Evan Ndicka and Odilon Kossounou has been the most consistent. Their combination of composure, physicality, and tactical awareness makes them a dependable pairing. At fullback, look for high-energy Guéla Doué and steady and reliable Ghislain Konan. Yahia Fofana remains the first-choice goalkeeper. He is supported by Alban Lafont.

MATCH DAYS

MATCH 1
→ Sunday, June 14 vs. Ecuador
→ Lincoln Financial Field, Philadelphia
→ 7 pm ET

GAME 2
→ Saturday, June 20 vs. Germany
→ Toronto Stadium, Toronto
→ 4 pm ET

GAME 3
→ Thursday, June 25 vs. Curaçao
→ Lincoln Financial Field, Philadelphia
→ 4 pm ET

PROJECTED STARTING XI

GK	YAHIA FOFANA
D	GUÉLA DOUÉ
D	ODILON KOSSOUNOU
D	EVAN NDICKA
D	GHISLAIN KONAN
MF	SEKO FOFANA
MF	FRANCK KESSIÉ
MF	IBRAHIM SANGARÉ
F	SÉBASTIEN HALLER
F	AMAD DIALLO
F	EVAN GUESSAND

The impact of manager Emerse Faé cannot be overstated. Faé guided the team to AFCON 2023 glory at home, winning him the CAF Coach of the Year award. Faé has since built on that success by establishing a clear identity within the team. He has moved away from reliance on individual brilliance and instead created a collective system where every player understands their role. His ability to blend experienced leaders with emerging talents has been key to Côte d'Ivoire's current stability.

MB MEDIA/GETTY IMAGES

TUNISIA

GROUP F
2026 WORLD CUP PREDICTION
GROUP STAGE

CAPITAL: TUNIS • POPULATION: 11.9 MILLION • SOCCER = KURAT AL-QADAM • FIRST WORLD CUP: 1978
NATIONAL TEAM NICKNAME: THE EAGLES OF CARTHAGE • WORLD CUP APPEARANCES: 7

Tunisia's qualification campaign showed signs of a team evolving with purpose. The team finished top of Africa's Group H with 28 points from 10 matches, scoring 22 goals and remarkably conceding zero. Going through an entire qualification campaign without conceding is rare, and it sends a strong message ahead of the World Cup.

This defensive solidity has always been part of Tunisia's DNA, but now it is paired with a more balanced and dynamic approach going forward. With a new coach in charge and a refreshed core, Tunisia are aiming to combine their traditional strengths with more attacking fluidity.

In attack, Tunisia will now rely heavily on Hazem Mastouri. He brings movement, physical presence, and a growing confidence in front of goal. Supporting him is a dynamic attacking cast led by Elias Achouri. Achouri offers pace, creativity, and the ability to take on defenders in wide areas. Seifeddine Jaziri adds energy and intelligent movement in the final third.

In midfield, Tunisia possess a strong blend of youth and experience. Young Hannibal Mejbri brings intensity, technical ability, and a fearless approach. His energy allows Tunisia to press higher and transition quickly, adding a different dimension to their midfield play. Alongside him, Ferjani Sassi provides experience and composure. A longtime national team member, Sassi offers leadership and tactical awareness, helping to maintain balance in midfield. And Ellyes Skhiri remains the anchor of the team. Skhiri plays a crucial role in breaking up opposition attacks and keeping the team organized.

Defensively, Tunisia rely on a well-structured and experienced backline. Montassar Talbi is a key figure, known for his strength, aerial ability, and composure under pressure. He is partnered with Dylan Bronn.

On the flanks, Yan Valery and Ali Abdi are expected to occupy the right back and left back roles. Tunisia can also count on the experience of Ali Maâloul and Yassine Meriah, seasoned internationals who provide depth, leadership and tactical understanding.

In goal, Aymen Dahmen is expected to be the first choice.

Tunisia heads into the tournament under new head coach Sabri Lamouchi. He arrives with a clear mandate: refresh the team while maintaining its competitive edge. Lamouchi is known for favoring an organized but progressive style. While he values defensive discipline, which is something Tunisia clearly excels at, he also encourages quicker ball circulation and more vertical attacking movements. Under his guidance, Tunisia are expected to press more selectively, transition faster, and make better use of their attacking players in space.

ALI ABDI

SATHIRE KELPA/EURASIA SPORT IMAGES/GETTY IMAGES

MATCH DAYS

MATCH 1
→ Sunday, June 14 vs. Sweden
→ Estadio BBVA, Monterrey
→ 10 pm ET

MATCH 2
→ Sunday, June 21 vs. Japan
→ Estadio BBVA, Monterrey
→ 12 am ET

MATCH 3
→ Thursday, June 25 vs. Netherlands
→ Arrowhead Stadium, Kansas City
→ 7 pm ET

PROJECTED STARTING XI

GK	Aymen Dahmen	D	Ali Abdi	MF	Hadj Mahmoud
D	Yan Valery	MF	Ellyes Skhiri	F	Hannibal Mejbri
D	Dylan Bronn	MF	Ferjani Sassi	F	Hazem Mastouri
D	Montassar Talbi	MF	Ismaël Gharbi		

DR CONGO

GROUP K
2026 WORLD CUP PREDICTION
GROUP STAGE

CAPITAL: KINSHASA • POPULATION: 116.4 MILLION • SOCCER = FUTBOL • FIRST WORLD CUP: 1974
NATIONAL TEAM NICKNAME: THE LEOPARDS • WORLD CUP APPEARANCES: 2

DR Congo may have been cursing its luck, having been drawn into an African Confederation group with powerhouse Senegal and then losing in penalty kicks to Nigeria in the deciding match of the second round. Then, in a must-win intercontinental playoff with Jamaica, the match ticked into extra time at 0-0. The frustration at the near-misses, however, finally faded away as Les Leopards topped Jamaica with a set-piece goal scored by center back Axel Tuanzebe.

CHANCEL MBEMBA

Perhaps it was fitting that Tuanzebe scored the decisive goal to put DR Congo into the World Cup for the first time since 1974, when it competed as Zaire. This team is built around its defense. Tuanzebe and right back Aaron Wan-Bissaka play in the Premier League, while captain and defensive mainstay Chancel Mbemba, with more than 100 caps, is in the French top division with Lille. Whether it's Arthur Masuaku or Joris Kayembe slotting into the left back slot, they form a four-man unit that gives attackers very little space and recovers well in the scare moments when attackers are able to find half a chance.

Many of those chances are snuffed out by defensive midfielder Samuel Moutoussamy, who also can get forward and have a shot on goal. His job in the middle is typically disrupting, while Théo Bongonda is tasked with connecting. The smooth left-footed player is typically a wide attacker but sometimes tucks inside for DR Congo to try and spark scoring moves with his passing.

While other eligible goalkeepers have joined up, including 21-year-old Standard Liege (Belgium) starter Matthieu Epolo, they all seem to be players preparing for the future. Lionel Mpasi-Nzau kept his starting role in goal through the African Cup of Nations and the playoff against Jamaica.

The questions about DR Congo, then, will be about the forwards. Veteran Cédric Bakambu typically starts up top for manager Sébastien Desabre, with Yoane Wissa either next to him or operating behind him as a second striker. Both have scored important goals for the national team, but the traveling supporters from DR Congo will be eager to see them do it more often and on the biggest stage. If they're able to find the back of the net more often, the team may be able to make a surprise run. If they head home after three games, it likely will be because the attack has let them down.

MATCH DAYS

MATCH 1
→ Wednesday, June 17 vs. Portugal
→ NRG Stadium, Houston
→ 1 pm ET

GAME 2
→ Tuesday, June 23 vs. Colombia
→ Estadio Akron, Guadalajara
→ 10 pm ET

GAME 3
→ Saturday, June 27 vs. Uzbekistan
→ Mercedes-Benz Stadium, Atlanta
→ 7:30 ET

PROJECTED STARTING XI

G	LIONEL MPASI-NZAU
D	AARON WAN-BISSAKA
D	CHANCEL MBEMBA
D	AXEL TUANZEBE
D	JORIS KAYEMBE
MF	THÉO BONGONDA
MF	SAMUEL MOUTOUSSAMY
MF	NOAH SADIKI
MF	MESCHACK ELIA
F	YOANE WISSA
F	CÉDRIC BAKAMBU

ULRIK PEDERSEN/NURPHOTO VIA GETTY IMAGES

IRAQ

GROUP I
2026 WORLD CUP PREDICTION
GROUP STAGE

CAPITAL: BAGHDAD • POPULATION: 48 MILLION • SOCCER = KURAT ALQADAM • FIRST WORLD CUP: 1986
NATIONAL TEAM NICKNAME: LIONS OF MESOPOTAMIA • WORLD CUP APPEARANCES: 2

The 48th and final team to clinch World Cup qualification, Iraq certainly took the long way to North America. After falling short in the second round of Asian qualification, the Lions of Mesopotamia had to beat Bolivia in March's intercontinental playoff to book their passage. Now, it's time to show the world their soccer potential after many years of war and hardship.

Iraq's squad is made up of a mix of players who play with the country's top pro clubs and players in relatively strong European leagues. The latter include Poland-based Amir Al-Ammari, Dutch-based Zidane Iqbal, or Marko Farji, who plays in Italy. That trio was born abroad to Iraqi parents. Others, like forward Ali Al-Hamadi and Norway-based former Sweden youth prospect Aimar Sher were born in Iraq but left with their families when they were children as the Iraq War began to intensify.

On the field, it's clear there is little division in the Iraq team. A firm defending side that is happy to cede possession and look to make the most of a few opportunities springing forward, Iraq's base starts at the back with longtime goalkeeper and captain Jalal Hassan. They missed him for the playoff, with Ahmed Basil stepping in and making five saves in that win-or-stay-home contest. But if Hassan is fit he'll lead the team. In front of him, a back line of physically imposing players, led by the 6'4" Zaid Tahseen, not only is often able to snuff out attacks but crucially has had success repelling set pieces. In front of them, Sher has served as the midfield anchor since debuting for the team in the fall of 2025.

While defense will likely remain the team's stronghold, Iraq trusts its attack. Veteran forward Ayman Hussein often gets the nod up top along with Al-Hamadi—both of whom scored in that deciding play-in game. A few creative options began emerging during the World Cup qualification cycle. Ali Jasim has fans dreaming with his ability to set up teammates, and Mohanad Ali is another player whose dribbling skills make him the subject of plenty of highlight videos. Yet, those players often come off the bench for manager Graham Arnold, another indication of where this team typically puts its emphasis, and how it feels it needs to set up if it's going to find success.

Still, with a reliable goalkeeper, a solid defensive base, and the chance to make something happen when getting forward, Iraq will hope that while they were the last squad to punch their ticket to the Cup, they won't be there simply to make up the numbers.

AYMEN HUSSEIN

HUSSEIN FALEH/AFP VIA GETTY IMAGES

MATCH DAYS

MATCH 1
→ Tuesday, June 16 vs. Norway
→ Gillette Stadium, Foxboro, MA
→ 6 pm ET

GAME 2
→ Monday, June 22 vs. France
→ Lincoln Financial Field, Philadelphia
→ 5 pm ET

GAME 3
→ Friday, June 26 vs. Senegal
→ BMO Field, Toronto
→ 3 pm ET

PROJECTED STARTING XI

G Jalal Hassan	D Merchas Doski	MF Ibrahim Bayesh
D Hussein Ali	MF Ali Jasim	F Ayman Hussein
D Zaid Tahseen	MF Aimar Sher	F Ali Al Hamadi
D Akam Hashem	MF Amir Al-Ammari	

QATAR

GROUP B
2026 WORLD CUP PREDICTION
GROUP STAGE

CAPITAL: DOHA • POPULATION: 3.1 MILLION • SOCCER = KURAT AL-QADAM • FIRST WORLD CUP: 2022
NATIONAL TEAM NICKNAME: THE MAROONS • WORLD CUP APPEARANCES: 2

They say you only get one chance to make a first impression, and in 2022 on home soil, with the blinding glare of the whole world watching, Qatar made the worst impression possible. Call it stage fright, call it a lack of quality, poor preparation—whatever it was, Qatar were humbled and embarrassed on what was the biggest stage they'd ever played, becoming the first host nation to be eliminated after just two games. How does a nation, never mind a team, recover from that? By coming back just over 12 months later, again on home soil, to claim back-to-back continental titles, is how.

AKRAM AFIF

It doesn't make much sense, but then not a lot has with Qatar over the past decade. They are the two sides of the same coin that is Qatari football. A team that has not lost a game at the AFC Asian Cup since the 2015 edition in Australia, a span stretching over 4,000 days, is also a team that, against the same Asian opposition, struggled badly in World Cup qualification.

They're a nation that can develop one of Asia's most gifted players of this generation, two-time AFC Player of the Year Akram Afif. But they are also one that relies on a healthy sprinkling of naturalized talent, given the dearth in local talent emerging through their own development pathways. They are, to quote Winston Churchill, a riddle wrapped in a mystery inside an enigma.

In qualification for this year's tournament, while Qatar breezed through the second round against weaker opposition—drawing 0-0 with Afghanistan and needing late goals to defeat India—it was a different matter when the level of opposition increased. The nadir came with a 5-0 hammering at the hands of Gulf rivals United Arab Emirates that spelled the end for manager "Tintín" Márquez López, the Spaniard who had guided them to continental glory just 10 months earlier.

Qatar replaced one Spanish coach with another, with former Spain national team and Real Madrid manager Julen Lopetegui given the seemingly impossible task of turning this side into a predictable, consistent team ahead of the World Cup. While he achieved his first mission in qualifying for the tournament, having had to run the gauntlet of the AFC's fourth round and a winner-takes-all match with the UAE, exacting some form of revenge for 2022, this is still very much a team that is a work in progress. They were bundled out of last year's Arab Cup after failing to win any of their three games, scoring just once in a string of underwhelming performances, albeit missing a string of first-team regulars.

But while Qatar possess the wizardry of Afif, the enigmatic talents of striker Almoez Ali, and a swathe of veterans, hope springs eternal that, without the added pressure of hosting, the riddle can be solved.

MATCH DAYS

MATCH 1
→ Saturday, June 13 vs. Switzerland
→ Levi's Stadium, San Francisco
→ 3 pm ET

MATCH 2
→ Thursday, June 18 vs. Canada
→ BC Place, Vancouver
→ 6 pm ET

MATCH 3
→ Wednesday, June 24 vs. Bosnia and Herzegovina
→ Lumen Field, Seattle
→ 3 pm ET

PROJECTED STARTING XI

GK	MESHAAL BARSHAM
D	AYOUB AL OUI
D	PEDRO MIGUEL
D	BOUALEM KHOUKI
D	SULTAN AL-BRAKE
MF	KARIM BOUDIAF
MF	ASSIM MADIBO
MF	EDMILSON JUNIOR
MF	MOHAMED AL-MANNAI
MF	AKRAM AFIF
F	ALMOEZ ALI

AN KRUGER - FIFA/FIFA VIA GETTY IMAGES

UZBEKISTAN

GROUP K
2026 WORLD CUP PREDICTION
GROUP STAGE

CAPITAL: TASHKENT • POPULATION: 38 MILLION • SOCCER = FUTBOL • FIRST WORLD CUP: 2026
NATIONAL TEAM NICKNAME: THE WHITE WOLVES • WORLD CUP APPEARANCES: 1

FIRST-TIMER!

Perhaps the only surprising thing about Uzbekistan's qualification for this year's World Cup—the nation's first—is that it took so long. A part of the former Soviet Union, the country declared independence in 1991 after the collapse of the USSR, and by 1994 was accepted as a member of both FIFA and the Asian Football Confederation. It was in October of that year that the White Wolves made their first foray into Asian football, competing at the Asian Games. They won it at their first attempt, signaling what many thought would be a new era of dominance for the Central Asian side.

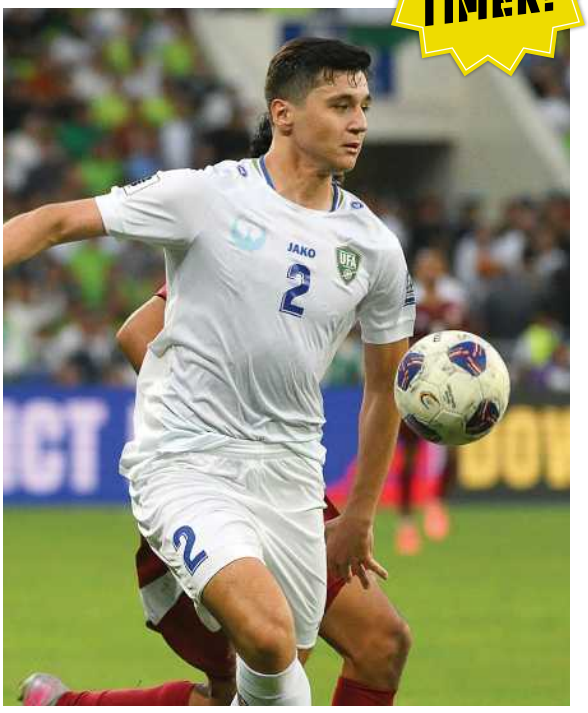
But despite producing some of the finest talent on the continent, the likes of Mirjalol Qosimov, Maksim Shatskikh, and Server Djeparov were never able to guide the White Wolves to the promised land. Over the past three decades, instead of dominance they earned the unwanted tag as chokers, always coming close but failing when the pressure arrived. There were agonizingly close qualification calls for both the 2014 and 2018 World Cups, and a semifinal appearance at the 2011 AFC Asian Cup, a match that ended with a 6-0 humiliation at the hands of Australia. Forever the bridesmaid, never the bride.

Come 2022, they even failed to reach the final round of World Cup qualifying for the first time in their history, a blow to the nation's ego but one, with the benefit of hindsight, that was a blessing in disguise. It forced a period of introspection and change within Uzbek football that culminated not only with their qualification in 2026, but also a spot in the 2024 Olympic Games.

While so many greats came before them, qualification was secured on the back of a "golden generation," one that had come through and achieved success together at an underage level. As many as 11 players from the team that won the AFC U23 Asian Cup in 2018 have progressed to be full internationals, many of them regulars in this 2026 squad, while already two of the successful U20 side from the 2023 AFC U20 Asian Cup are key parts of the lineup written out by manager and Italian legend Fabio Cannavaro.

One of those rising stars is 21-year-old Abdukodir Khusanov, who last year earned a life-changing move to Manchester City, where he has earned effusive praise from none other than Pep Guardiola, who called the central defender an "incredible" talent. While they may be short on experience, this is not a generation of Uzbek players that is short on confidence. Exciting midfielder Abbosbek Fayzullaev, also a member of the successful U20 squad, claimed back in 2023 that his generation would ". . . play the best football Uzbekistan will ever play."

It may have taken longer than expected to reach the World Cup, but they'll be hoping it was worth the wait.



ABDUKODIR KHUSANOV

ANVAR ILYASOV/GETTY IMAGES

MATCH DAYS

MATCH 1
→ Wednesday, June 17 vs. Colombia
→ Estadio Azteca, Mexico City
→ 10 pm ET

GAME 2
→ Tuesday, June 23 vs. Portugal
→ NRG Stadium, Houston
→ 1 pm ET

GAME 3
→ Saturday, June 27 vs. DR Congo
→ Mercedes-Benz Stadium, Atlanta
→ 7:30 pm ET

PROJECTED STARTING XI

GK	Abduvohid Nematov	D	Umarbek Eshmurodov	MF	Odiljon Xamrobekov
D	Khojiakbar Alijonov	D	Sherzod Nasrullaev	MF	Oston Urunov
D	Abdukodir Khusanov	MF	Abbosbek Fayzullaev	F	Eldor Shomurodov
D	Rustamjon Ashurmatov	MF	Otabek Shukurov		

SOUTH AFRICA

GROUP A
2026 WORLD CUP PREDICTION
GROUP STAGE

CAPITAL: PRETORIA • POPULATION: 63.4 MILLION • SOCCER = IBHOLA LEZINYAWO* • FIRST WORLD CUP: 1998
NATIONAL TEAM NICKNAME: BAFANA BAFANA • WORLD CUP APPEARANCES: 4

South Africa has a rich football history and is known for producing dynamic, technically gifted players. But World Cup campaigns have been challenging, with the team never advancing past the group stage.

South Africa's attack is led by Lyle Foster, who brings physicality, aerial ability, and a clinical finishing touch. Supporting him are Oswin Appollis and Elias Mokwana. Makgopa provides pace and flair on the wings, while Mokwana adds versatility and movement off the ball. South Africa often plays a 4-2-3-1, allowing Foster to operate as the central striker. Counter-attacks remain a key weapon, and set pieces are especially valuable with Mokwana and Foster posing aerial threats.

OSWIN APPOLLIS

South Africa's midfield features 21-year-old Relebohile Mofokeng as the exciting attacking option, capable of driving forward and creating chances with his vision and flair. Thalente Mbatha, 26, has long-range shooting ability, often catching goalkeepers off guard, while Sipho Mbule offers control, distribution, and defensive awareness. Teboho Mokoena remains the midfield linchpin, combining composure, leadership, and the ability to link defense and attack efficiently. Their collective energy and tactical awareness have been crucial in AFCON matches, where South Africa demonstrated resilience against teams like Cameroon, Egypt and Angola.

Just 20 years old, Mbekezeli Mbokazi anchors the defense with strong instincts, positioning, and aerial ability. He and Siyabonga Ngezana form a center back duo with physicality and tactical understanding. Fullbacks Aubrey Modiba and Khuliso Mudau use pace, crossing ability, and defensive awareness to add balance to the team's tactical setup. The defense is capable of adjusting to back-four or three-center-back formations depending on the opposition's approach.

Ronwen Williams is the No. 1 goalkeeper and captain, providing exceptional leadership, calm authority, and outstanding distribution with his feet. His ability to play high with the defenders makes it risky for opponents to press, as a single precise pass from Williams can unlock defenses.

From South Africa's bench, look for experienced midfielder Themba Zwane, if selected, to provide creativity and leadership. The team might also use young talents like Mohau Nkota for energy and pace.

The current manager is Hugo Broos, who previously led Cameroon to the 2017 AFCON title. Under him, South Africa typically lines up in a 4-2-3-1 but can shift to 4-3-3 or 3-5-2. Broos' teams are disciplined defensively, press intelligently, and exploit counter-attacks efficiently.

The team will certainly bring energy to the games, and if its youth rise to the occasion, could provide surprises. But a better World Cup for South Africa than in the past would be a pretty big surprise.

**South Africa has 12 official languages. We used Zulu, listed as the most-spoken.*

MATCH DAYS

MATCH 1
→ Thursday, June 11 vs. Mexico
→ Estadio Azteca, Mexico City
→ 3 pm ET

MATCH 2
→ Thursday, June 18 vs. Czechia
→ Mercedes-Benz Stadium, Atlanta
→ 12 pm ET

MATCH 3
→ Wednesday, June 24 vs. Korea Republic
→ Estadio Monterrey, Monterrey
→ 9 pm ET

PROJECTED STARTING XI

GK	RONWEN WILLIAMS
D	AUBREY MODIBA
D	MBEKEZELI MBOKAZI
D	SIYABONGA NGEZANA
D	KHULISO MUDAU
MF	RELEBOHILE MOFOKENG
MF	TEBOHO MOKOENA
MF	THALENTE MBATHA
F	TSHEPANG MOREMI
F	LYLE FOSTER
F	OSWIN APPOLLIS

VISIONHAUS/GETTY IMAGES

SAUDI ARABIA

GROUP H
2026 WORLD CUP PREDICTION
GROUP STAGE

CAPITAL: RIYADH • POPULATION: 33.6 MILLION • SOCCER = KURAT AL-QADAM • FIRST WORLD CUP: 1994
NATIONAL TEAM NICKNAME: THE GREEN FALCONS • WORLD CUP APPEARANCES: 7

Returning to the United States for a World Cup will evoke all sorts of memories for Saudi Arabia and its legion of passionate fans. We all remember their modern-day heroics in 2022 in Qatar; the shock that reverberated around the world after their stunning 2-1 upset of eventual champions Argentina in an opening match. It was one of the biggest upsets in World Cup history and stands as one of the finest moments in the history of Saudi football.

But long before they had their "Argentina moment," they had another moment in Washington, D.C. In 1994, Saudi Arabia qualified for its first Cup. On a scorching hot day at RFK Stadium, Saeed Al-Owairan's scything run through a Belgian midfield and defense to score remains one of the World Cup's most iconic goals. The goal gave Saudi Arabia a precious 1-0 win, earning them second place in the group and advancing to the knockout rounds in their first try. Despite their heroics over Argentina in Qatar, the 1994 tournament remains the only time they have advanced to the knockout stages of the World Cup.

Arriving back in the US 32 years later, they will be hoping history repeats. But the context within which we view Saudi football has changed dramatically since Qatar, let alone the 1994 World Cup. They arrive stateside very much a known quantity. They largely flew under the radar in their previous six appearances, but the Argentina result and the influx of global superstars to the domestic Saudi Pro League (SPL) mean Saudi football is now very much on the map.

That has only heightened expectations, internally and externally, but whether this team is capable of matching those expectations is the biggest question facing manager Hervé Renard's side heading into this tournament, after they stuttered through qualifying. The stylish Frenchman has bemoaned the lack of game time his players received after those many stars "invaded" the SPL, while generational change means the team that faced Argentina bears little resemblance to the one that will take the field against Uruguay, Spain, and Cape Verde.

The one common thread, however, is star winger Salem Al-Dawsari, who created his own "Al-Owairan moment" with his screamer against Argentina. The reigning Asian football Player of the Year remains not only his country's biggest star, but also its biggest attacking threat. His ingenuity in attack can unlock any defense and, despite now being 34, he seems to only get better with age for club side Al Hilal. Will he do it again, and join an elite group of players to score at three consecutive World Cups, or will someone else stand up to create their own iconic World Cup moment?

MOHAMED KANNO

NOUSHAD THEKKAYIL/NURPHOTO VIA GETTY IMAGES)

MATCH DAYS

MATCH 1
→ Monday, June 15 vs. Uruguay
→ Hard Rock Stadium, Miami
→ 6 pm ET

GAME 2
→ Sunday, June 21 vs. Spain
→ Mercedes-Benz Stadium, Atlanta
→ 12 pm ET

GAME 3
→ Friday, June 26 vs. Cape Verde
→ NRG Stadium, Houston
→ 8 pm ET

PROJECTED STARTING XI

GK	Nawaf Al-Aqidi	D	Nawaf Boushal	F	Salem Al-Dawsari
D	Saud Abdulhamid	MF	Mohamed Kanno	F	Firas Al-Buraikan
D	Hassan Al-Tombakti	MF	Abdullah Al-Khaibari	F	Saleh Abu Al-Shamat
D	Jehad Thakri	MF	Musab Al-Juwayr		

JORDAN

GROUP J
2026 WORLD CUP PREDICTION
GROUP STAGE

FIRST-TIMER!

CAPITAL: AMMAN • POPULATION: 33.6 MILLION • SOCCER = KURAT AL-QADAM • FIRST WORLD CUP: 2026
NATIONAL TEAM NICKNAME: AL NASHAMA • WORLD CUP APPEARANCES: 1

Jordan will be making their World Cup debut when they kick off against Austria in Santa Clara, California, on June 16. The nation finally booked their tickets for the biggest event in the sport after several near misses with a fast-developing squad. Qualification was the latest high point for a side that has been on a rapid rise up the continental rankings, having made an unexpected run to the final of the 2023 Asian Cup.

The Jordanians have tasted limited success in the past, qualifying for the Asian Cup quarterfinals in 2004 and 2011, while in 2013 the country advanced to a playoff against Uruguay for a berth at the 2014 World Cup. That adventure ended in a heavy defeat. No one, however, was able to deny the nation this run to the expanded finals, with Jordan claiming one of Asia's eight guaranteed spots from a group that also featured South Korea, Iraq, Oman, Palestine, and Kuwait.

YAZAN AL-NAIMAT

Moroccan coach Hussein Ammouta led the country to the Asian Cup final—the first in their history—but his departure in August 2024 did not lead to an expected drop-off in quality for Al Nashama. Jamal Sellami, another Moroccan, stepped into the role and continued to build towards World Cup qualification, using a talented squad built around solid defense and a rapier attack. In December, he led the country to the final of the Arab Cup.

Sellami's squad features a blend of youth and experience, with France-based forward Musa Al-Taamari the standout forward on a team that is capable of punishing opponents on the counterattack. The 28-year-old, who plays his club football for Rennes (France), is not the only threat the Jordanians carry. Yazan Al-Naimat can play through the middle or down the flank and has a keen eye for the goal, scoring 26 times in 70 appearances through the end of 2025. Ali Olwan, who like Al-Naimat plays his club football in Qatar, is even more prolific in an attack that is capable of sharing the scoring load.

Jordan's four-man midfield provides stability that allows the forward line to cause havoc for the opponents, with the experienced Rajaei Ayed and Nizar Al-Rashdan anchoring the team in the central positions.

MATCH DAYS

MATCH 1
→ Wednesday, June 17 vs. Austria
→ Levi's Stadium, San Francisco
→ 12 am ET

MATCH 2
→ Monday, June 22 vs. Algeria
→ Levi's Stadium, San Francisco
→ 11 pm ET

MATCH 3
→ Saturday, June 27 vs. Argentina
→ AT&T Stadium, Dallas
→ 10 pm ET

PROJECTED STARTING XI

GK YAZEED ABU LAILA
D ABDALLAH NASIB
D YAZAN AL-ARAB
D MOHAMMAD ABU AL-NADI
MF EHSAN HADDAD
MF RAJAEI AYED
MF NIZAR AL-RASHDAN
MF MOHANNAD ABU TAHA
F MUSA AL-TAAMARI
F YAZAN AL-NAIMAT
F ALI OLWAN

Well-traveled defender Yazan Al-Arab, currently on the books of FC Seoul, marshals the back line alongside Mohammad Abu Al-Nadi and Abdallah Nasib in a three-man set-up. Yazeed Abu Laila, meanwhile, is the undisputed first choice between the posts. The commanding 33-year-old Al Hussain (Jordan) goalkeeper provided the solidity and composure that saw him named on the Asian Cup's Team of the Tournament in 2023.

MOHAMED FARAG - FIFA/FIFA VIA GETTY IMAGES)

CAPE VERDE

GROUP H
2026 WORLD CUP PREDICTION
GROUP STAGE

CAPITAL: PRAIA • POPULATION: 491,000 • SOCCER = FUTEBOL • FIRST WORLD CUP: 2026
NATIONAL TEAM NICKNAME: THE BLUE SHARKS • WORLD CUP APPEARANCES: 1

FIRST-TIMER!

For a nation of just over half a million people scattered across islands in the Atlantic Ocean, Cape Verde's rise in international football has become one of the most remarkable stories in modern African football. Long viewed as outsiders on the continental stage, the Blue Sharks have steadily built a competitive and disciplined national team.

That steady progress has produced a historic milestone, qualifying for the World Cup for the first time. For a country with a small population but a deep love for football, reaching the world's biggest sporting stage is a huge accomplishment.

Much of the team's progress has been built on the strong connection between Cape Verdean football and Portugal, from which the islands became independent in 1975. Many members of the squad developed in European academies and leagues, bringing valuable experience and tactical awareness into the national setup. This blend of European development and African resilience has helped create a balanced and well-organized team capable of competing at a high level.

On offense, Cape Verde possess a mix of experience and energy. Dailon Livramento is one of the key attacking threats. Alongside him is veteran winger Ryan Mendes, whose leadership and experience remain invaluable to the team. The attack is further strengthened by Willy Semedo and Heriberto Tavares, providing additional pace and creativity in the final third.

The midfield features an important partnership built around balance and understanding. Kevin Pina brings composure and tactical discipline to the middle of the pitch. His partnership with Semedo has become a key element of Cape Verde's midfield. Supporting them further forward are Telmo Arcanjo of Vitória de Guimarães (Portugal), an attacking midfielder, and Deroy Duarte, who plays professionally in Bulgaria.

Defensively, Cape Verde rely on experience and organization. Roberto Lopes provides leadership in the center. He is often partnered with Diney, forming a reliable central defensive pairing. On the flanks, the defensive line is completed by David Moreira and João Paulo, who occupy the right and left back positions and play an important role in maintaining the team's compact structure.

Between the posts stands veteran goalkeeper Vozinha. One of the most experienced players on the squad, Vozinha played a crucial role in guiding Cape Verde through their qualification campaign.

Leading this historic generation is head coach Pedro Leitão "Bubista" Brito, who was named CAF Coach of the Year for 2025. Under his guidance, Cape Verde have developed a disciplined tactical identity built around defensive organization, teamwork, and quick transitions. Cape Verde are expected to line up in a structured 4-2-3-1 formation, designed to maintain defensive solidity while allowing their attacking players to exploit space on the counter.

DEROY DUARTE

AHMED GOMAA/XINHUA VIA GETTY IMAGES

MATCH DAYS

MATCH 1
→ Monday, June 15 vs. Spain
→ Mercedes-Benz Stadium, Atlanta
→ 12 pm ET

MATCH 2
→ Sunday, June 21 vs. Uruguay
→ Hard Rock Stadium, Miami
→ 6 pm ET

MATCH 3
→ Friday, June 26 vs. Saudi Arabia
→ NRG Stadium, Houston
→ 8 pm ET

PROJECTED STARTING XI

GK	Vozinha	D	João Paulo	MF	Kevin Pina
D	David Moreira	MF	Aílson Júnior Mendes Tavares	MF	Telmo Arcanjo
D	Roberto Lopes			MF	Jovane Cabral
D	Diney	MF	Willy Semedo	F	Dailon Livramento

GHANA

GROUP L
2026 WORLD CUP PREDICTION
GROUP STAGE

CAPITAL: ACCRA • POPULATION: 33.5 MILLION • SOCCER = FOOTBALL • FIRST WORLD CUP: 2006
NATIONAL TEAM NICKNAME: THE BLACK STARS • WORLD CUP APPEARANCES: 5

The Black Stars are one of Africa's most respected footballing nations. Renowned for producing technically gifted, physically strong, and tactically intelligent players, Ghana has consistently been a major contender for years. Their most notable World Cup achievement came in 2010 when they reached the quarterfinals in South Africa, narrowly losing to Uruguay.

The 2026 squad is led by Otto Addo, appointed head coach in 2022. A former German-born Ghana international, Addo brings extensive European experience, having served in Bundesliga coaching roles before taking charge of the Black Stars.

MOHAMMED KUDUS

Ghana's attack is led by Antoine Semenyo, recently signed by Manchester City, who brings pace, physicality, and finishing prowess. Supporting him are Jordan and Iñaki Williams, who offer versatility, explosive runs, and goal-scoring ability. Emerging talents such as Kamaldeen Sulemana and Issahaku Fatawu (21 years old) inject energy, creativity, and flair into the front line. The Black Stars typically operate in a 4-2-3-1 formation, giving Semenyo the freedom to drift, create space, and link with wide forwards.

Thomas Partey anchors the midfield, providing defensive cover and distribution with precision. Mohammed Kudus adds vision, dribbling ability, and late attacking runs, though he is currently recovering from injury; Ghana will hope he gains match fitness before the World Cup. Caleb Yirenki, just 20 years old, is an exciting talent to watch, capable of breaking lines and creating opportunities. Salis Abdul Samed adds defensive solidity, energy, and tactical awareness, while André Ayew offers creativity and experience, hoping to make what could be his final World Cup appearance.

On defense, Ghana boasts a mix of youth and experience. Mohammed Salisu anchors the backline, combining strength, composure, and tactical intelligence. Partnered with Alexander Djiku, the central defenders form a disciplined and communicative unit capable of adapting to different attacking threats. Fullbacks Tariq Lamptey and Gideon Mensah provide width, overlapping runs, and crossing ability. The defense is versatile, able to switch between a flat back four and three-center-back system depending on opposition tactics. Benjamin Asare is Ghana's No. 1 goalkeeper. Known for his command of the box, shot-stopping, and composure, he also excels with the ball at his feet.

MATCH DAYS

MATCH 1
→ Wednesday, June 17 vs. Panama
→ BMO Field, Toronto
→ 7 pm ET

GAME 2
→ Tuesday, June 23 vs. England
→ Gillette Stadium, Boston
→ 4 pm ET

GAME 3
→ Saturday, June 27 vs. Croatia
→ Lincoln Financial Field, Philadelphia
→ 5 pm ET

PROJECTED STARTING XI

GK	BENJAMIN ASARE
D	MOHAMMED SALISU
D	ALEXANDER DJIKU
D	TARIQ LAMPTEY
D	GIDEON MENSAH
MF	THOMAS PARTEY
MF	MOHAMMED KUDUS
MF	SALIS ABDUL SAMED
F	IÑAKI WILLIAMS
F	ANTOINE SEMENYO
F	JORDAN AYEW

Off the bench, defensive options include Alidu Seidu, while midfielders Abu Francis and Kwasi Sibo can add energy and stability. In attack, Jerry Afriyie, Joseph Paintsil, and Christopher Bonsu Baah provide pace, creativity, and goal-scoring.

Under Addo, Ghana lines up in a 4-2-3-1, but can shift to 4-3-3 or 3-5-2 depending on the opponent. His teams press intelligently, control tempo, and use transitions to exploit space. With the right mix, Ghana can be a dangerous opponent.

ULRIK PEDERSEN/DEFODI IMAGES VIA GETTY IMAGES

CURAÇAO

GROUP E
2026 WORLD CUP PREDICTION
ROUND OF 32

FIRST-TIMER!

CAPITAL: WILLEMSTAD • POPULATION: 156,000 • SOCCER = FUTBÒL • FIRST WORLD CUP: 2026
NATIONAL TEAM NICKNAME: THE BLUE WAVE • WORLD CUP APPEARANCES: 1

Welcome to the smallest nation ever to qualify for the World Cup. How does an island with about 156,000 people gather enough talent to reach the final 48? Look to Europe. Curaçao only became a nation in 2010 when it became an autonomous country within the Kingdom of the Netherlands after years as the Netherlands Antilles. With the island's long-standing ties to Holland, most of Curaçao's players were born and have played professionally there. Dick Advocaat, who coached the Dutch national team three times, was Curaçao's manager in qualifying, but had to withdraw for family reasons, so Fred Ruten (also Dutch) takes over.

Curaçao was drawn into a deep group alongside Germany, Ivory Coast, and Ecuador but a win could see them advance as a third-place team, which would count as a huge victory in its World Cup debut.

Curaçao dominated CONCACAF qualifying with a balanced attack—10 players scored goals but no one had more than two. Dutch-born striker Rangelo Janga, 34, is the national team's all-time leading scorer, but he was left off the roster for Curaçao's fall qualifiers. He's expected to be in the mix for the World Cup. Newcomer Jordi Paulina, 21, scored his first two international goals in his first start for Curaçao. Wingers Kenji Gorré and newcomer Tahith Chong provide creativity and pace. Chong, a former Manchester United prospect, is one of the few players born in Curaçao.

Much of Curaçao's scoring punch comes from a dynamic midfield led by brothers Leandro and Juninho Bacuna. Leandro, 34, the team captain, tops Curaçao with 68 appearances and is second with 13 goals. He's experienced, too, having spent a dozen seasons in the Eredivisie and in England before moving to Bandırmaspor in the Turkish second division in 2025. Juninho, who also plays in Türkiye, has 13 international goals. Godfried Roemeratoe, another former Dutch youth international, is a solid holding midfielder who has played more than 200 games in Europe and Israel despite being just 26.

On defense, Curaçao plays a standard back four and is young, with the seven players it called up for the final round of qualifying averaging just 27 years of age. But the back line has played well as a unit, allowing just three goals and posting four clean sheets in the final six-game round of qualifying. Center back Juriën Gaari, 32, who plays his club soccer in Saudi Arabia, is the defensive leader.

Eloy Room has been Curaçao's longtime goalkeeper but after playing in the Eredivisie, followed by five seasons with the Columbus Crew in MLS, Room recently signed with Miami of the USL Championship, not a level of play to prep for the World Cup.

LEANDRO BACUNA

CATHERINE IVILL - AMA/GETTY IMAGES

MATCH DAYS

MATCH 1
→ Sunday, June 14 vs. Germany
→ NRG Stadium, Houston
→ 1 pm ET

GAME 2
→ Saturday, June 20 vs. Ecuador
→ Arrowhead Stadium, Kansas City
→ 8 pm ET

GAME 3
→ Thursday, June 25 vs. Ivory Coast
→ Lincoln Financial Field, Philadelphia
→ 4 pm ET

PROJECTED STARTING XI

GK	Eloy Room	D	Sherel Floranus	F	Kenji Gorré
D	Shurandy Sambo	MF	Leandro Bacuna	F	Rangelo Janga
D	Roshon van Eijma	MF	Godfried Roemeratoe	F	Jordi Paulina
D	Juriën Gaari	MF	Juninho Bacuna		

NEW ZEALAND

GROUP G
2026 WORLD CUP PREDICTION
GROUP STAGE

CAPITAL: WELLINGTON • POPULATION: 5.1 MILLION • SOCCER = FOOTBALL • FIRST WORLD CUP: 1982
NATIONAL TEAM NICKNAME: THE ALL WHITES • WORLD CUP APPEARANCES: 3

New Zealand returns to the FIFA World Cup for the first time since 2010 and for only the third time in the nation's history. The country claimed the Oceania Football Confederation's first-ever guaranteed berth as a result of the tournament's expansion to 48 nations. In qualifying, the All Whites made light work of their opponents, earning consecutive wins over Tahiti, Vanuatu, and Samoa to progress from the group phase, before beating Fiji and New Caledonia to secure their ticket for the Cup.

CHRIS WOOD

Their record of 29 goals in those five matches with just one conceded underlines the gulf in class between Darren Bazeley's squad and the teams they faced. The challenge in June and July will be how the players handle the step up in quality at the World Cup. New Zealand travel to the finals with a modest World Cup pedigree, having exited the competition at the group phase on both of their earlier appearances. They debuted against the odds back in 1982 and did not impress. Their performance in 2010, though, stands out as one of the memorable performances of that event in South Africa, as the Ricki Herbert-coached team emerged as the competition's only unbeaten side with three draws—including against then-defending champion Italy—in the group phase.

For 2026, Nottingham Forest (Premier League) striker Chris Wood is unquestionably the squad's highest profile performer. The 34-year-old was a prolific presence for his country throughout the qualifiers with nine goals in five appearances. His ability both in the air and on the ground makes him a constant menace, and much will hinge on his availability after 2025 injuries.

Beyond Wood, few within the squad have extensive experience of top-flight European football, with the majority either playing in lesser leagues or for the New Zealand clubs that play in the A-League in Australia.

Goalkeeper Max Crocombe has established himself as the first choice between the posts, and he has featured regularly in the Championship level in England as Millwall chased promotion to the Premier League, gaining valuable experience of high-pressure contests.

Minnesota United's Michael Boxall, who will turn 38 in August, and 21-year-old Tyler Bindon form the central defensive partnership, with full-backs Tim Payne and Liberato Cacace completing the four-man backline. The midfield is built around the central pairing of Matthew Garbett and Marko Stamenić, a promising duo with their best years ahead of them, while Elijah Just is one option to partner with Wood in attack as part of a three-man forward line.

Coach Bazeley will be making his World Cup debut, but the England-born tactician has experienced global competition before, leading New Zealand at the Olympic Games in Paris in 2024. A good result against Iran or Egypt might see the Kiwis squeak out of the group stage, assuming a loss to opener Belgium.

MATCH DAYS

MATCH 1
→ Monday, June 15 vs. Iran
→ SoFi Stadium, Los Angeles
→ 9 pm ET

MATCH 2
→ Sunday, June 21 vs. Egypt
→ BC Place Vancouver
→ 9 pm ET

MATCH 3
→ Friday, June 26 vs. Belgium
→ BC Place, Vancouver
→ 11 pm ET

PROJECTED STARTING XI

GK	MAX CROCOMBE
D	TIM PAYNE
D	MICHAEL BOXALL
D	TYLER BINDON
D	LIBERATO CACACE
MF	MATTHEW GARBETT
MF	MARKO STAMENIĆ
MF	ELIJAH JUST
MF	CALLUM MCCOWATT
MF	SARPREET SINGH
F	CHRIS WOOD

HAGEN HOPKINS/GETTY IMAGES

HAITI

GROUP C
2026 WORLD CUP PREDICTION
GROUP STAGE

CAPITAL: PORT-AU-PRINCE • POPULATION: 12.5 MILLION • SOCCER = LE FOOTBALL • FIRST WORLD CUP: 1974
NATIONAL TEAM NICKNAME: LES GRENADIERS • WORLD CUP APPEARANCES: 2

Last year, during a difficult stretch for the country of Haiti, the men's national team clinched World Cup qualification for the first time since 1974. The violence and unrest in Haiti meant the team couldn't play matches at home, relying on a neutral venue in Curaçao to serve as home base during the final round of qualification. Still, Haiti was able to overcome the lack of home-field advantage and earn a place by falling just once in six final-round qualifiers.

Les Grenadiers will rely on a mix of players who have been suiting up for the national team for years and years, along with an infusion of new talent representing the country of their parents or grandparents. Goalkeeper Johny Placide, who will make his World Cup debut at age 38, is a member of the old guard. So, too, is forward Duckens Nazon, the country's all-time leading scorer whose hat trick against Costa Rica in qualification started to give the team belief that they could pull it off despite the long odds. Also emblematic is center back Ricardo Adé, who has spent most of his career in South America, making it all the way to the semifinals of the Copa Libertadores in 2025 with LDU Quito (Ecuador).

The most critical new face is Jean-Richner Bellegarde. The midfielder became the first Haitian international to play in the Premier League after switching his affiliation from France and playing in all six matches of the final round of Haiti's World Cup qualification. His attacking creativity provided another dimension, and his example encouraged other eligible players to join during qualification. Adé found a partner in Hannes Delcroix, who despite being born in Haiti, was raised in Belgium and played one match for that European country before switching in October 2025.

Versatility is prized by Haiti, with Duke Lacroix, Ruben Providence, Josué Casimir, and Louicius Don Deedson among players who were deployed at multiple positions during the qualification cycle. Lacroix, who plays with the Colorado Springs Switchbacks in the USL Championship, settled in at left back, but competition will be fierce. Slots up top also will be coveted, with veteran forwards Frantzdy Pierrot and Derrick Etienne Jr., plus Canada-born new arrival Woobens Pacius hoping to relegate Nazon to the bench.

Manager Sébastien Migné is not afraid to make changes match-to-match or in a game, sometimes deploying heavily changed lineups or modifying tactics based on how he views an opponent.

Don't be surprised to see Haiti come out to play more than other underdogs in this tournament. They'll go into the World Cup with nothing to lose and eager to give those watching back home a show they'll be talking about for years.

RICARDO ADÉ

KEVIN JAIRAJ-IMAGN IMAGES

MATCH DAYS

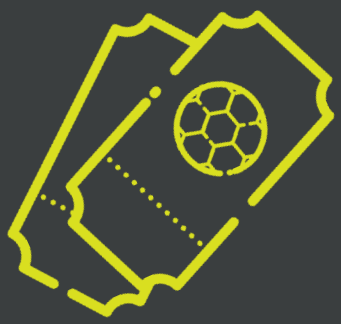
MATCH 1
→ Saturday, June 13 vs. Scotland
→ Gillette Stadium, Boston
→ 9 pm ET

MATCH 2
→ Friday, June 19 vs. Brazil
→ Lincoln Financial Field, Philadelphia
→ 9 pm ET

MATCH 3
→ Wednesday, June 24 vs. Morocco
→ Mercedes-Benz Stadium, Atlanta
→ 3 pm ET

PROJECTED STARTING XI

GK Johny Placide
D Carlens Arcus
D Ricardo Adé
D Hannes Delcroix
D Duke Lacroix
MF Ruben Providence
MF Danley Jean Jacques
MF Leverton Pierre
MF Jean-Ricner Bellegarde
F Frantzdy Pierrot
F Duckens Nazon



NO TICKETS? NO PROBLEM!

Watch Every Minute of Every Game Free*!

BY MICHAEL LEWIS

If you don't want to spend a ridiculous amount of money, take out a second or third mortgage, max out your credit cards, or go broke watching the 2026 World Cup in person, there is a much less expensive option.

You can view it just about anywhere in the United States—at home, on a train, or plane, and at work.

FOX Sports plans to present the most extensive World Cup coverage in American history during the quadrennial event, which kicks off on June 11 before culminating with the final in East Rutherford, NJ on July 19.

A record 70 matches will be shown on broadcast TV, with all 104 games on the company's various platforms. That includes 34 contests on FS1. Every game also will stream live on FOX One and the FOX Sports App. Tubi, the Fox Corporation's ad-supported streaming service, will simulcast live in 4K for free the opening ceremonies and two games—Mexico vs. South Africa at Estadio Azteca on Thursday, June 11 and the U.S. vs. Paraguay on Friday, June 12.

"FOX Sports' presentation of FIFA World Cup 26 is going to be the biggest production in our company's 32-year history, and we couldn't be more excited to showcase this once-in-a-lifetime event with more matches on broadcast television than ever before," FOX Sports CEO and executive producer Eric Shanks said in a statement. "The largest World Cup ever means this is going to be a television event unlike any other with more teams, superstars, storylines and moments that will captivate audiences everywhere."

For the Spanish-speaking audience, Telemundo and Universo will televise all 104 games live, the most World Cup coverage over by a US broadcast network, regardless of language. Matches in Spanish will also stream live on Peacock for Premium and Premium Plus subscribers, and on the Telemundo App. Add in studio shows and pregames and Telemundo plans to present 700 hours of programming during the tournament. And yes, fans, Andres Cantor, creator of the famous, "how does he have enough breath!" extended "Goooooooooollllll!" call will be on the mic for key games.

As for FOX, several familiar personalities and voices will be seen and heard during matches.

John Strong (page 41) and Stu Holden will be the lead World Cup's announcing team. They will work their third successive men's World Cup with FOX Sports, and they will call every US Men's National Team match on FOX.

*Okay, some cable charges may apply—but free at a sports bar!

From left: Rob Stone, Landon Donovan, Maurice Edu, and Alexi Lalas

Rebecca Lowe (top) and Andres Cantor

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: JOHN DORTON/ISI PHOTOS/USSF/GETTY IMAGES; KARWAI TANG/WIREIMAGE; ANGEL VALENTIN-FOR THE WASHINGTON POST VIA GETTY IMAGES); FERNANDO LEON/GETTY IMAGES FOR THE PREMIER LEAGUE

LIONEL HAHN

The stable of analysts is well-known to American soccer supporters. That includes former USMNT standouts Alexi Lalas, Landon Donovan (page 144), Cobi Jones, and Maurice Edu; two-time FIFA Women's World Cup and Olympic champion Carli Lloyd (page 39), and Thierry Henry, a Premier League great and member of France's 1998 World Cup championship side.

JP Dellacamera also will return to work his 18th World Cup as an announcer, which includes Women's World Cups.

Rob Stone and Rebecca Lowe will anchor coverage as studio hosts, which will include pre- and post-match shows.

Thierry Henry

On July 4, FOX Sports will celebrate the United States' 250th birthday, with a pair of Round of 16 matches and fireworks. Coverage will begin at noon ET and run through 8 p.m. ET.

So, no, it won't be like being there in person. But at home or while you travel, you don't have to pay for parking.

EXTRA TIME

w/ LANDON DONOVAN

Although Christian Pulisic is nipping at his cleats, Landon Donovan remains the player most experts call the best American soccer star of all time. In Major League Soccer (MLS), his 136 assists and six MLS Cup titles are the most ever; the league's MVP trophy was re-named for him in 2015. For the US, Donovan's 58 international assists are the most; until his record was topped, that was also the highest total by any international player in the world. His 57 goals while wearing the red, white, and blue (in 157 international games) are tied for most with Clint Dempsey. Donovan played in 12 World Cup games for the US across 2002, 2006, and 2010. So when he talks about the World Cup . . . he knows his business. Speaking of talking, Donovan will be part of FOX Sports coverage of the games. He also co-hosts the weekly podcast Unfiltered Soccer with former teammate Tim Howard.

—Kevin Baxter

Athlon Sports: What can this World Cup mean for soccer in the United States?

Donovan: The reality still in our sport is that the biggest way to make progress is over three or four or five games every four years. So while MLS and international soccer and the NWSL and USL are all helping boost the sport, the biggest bump you get is through a World Cup. And it's exacerbated when it's at home. So the opportunity is hard to overstate. Everywhere you go, you're going to see commercials, advertisements, billboards, on the radio, podcast, social media. Everybody's going to be talking about the World Cup and the US team.

The 1994 World Cup, hosted by the US, was a watershed event for soccer in this country, leading to the creation of MLS, among other things. What advances or changes will this tournament inspire?

I don't know anything tangible will come out of it in that way, but the intangibles, I think, will be even more important than they were in '94—the millions, if not tens of millions, of new soccer fans that will be created. That will be true especially if the US goes on a long run through the tournament or has an iconic moment that grabs people and captivates them in a way they haven't been before.

Like your goal against Algeria in 2010?

Yeah. Imagine if Christian Pulisic scores an amazing goal that gets us from the round of 32 to the round of 16. It will be seen by hundreds of millions of Americans, maybe not live, but through social media and TV and on the news the next day. That can really, really promote the game in a way that nothing else can.

DONOVAN EXULTS AFTER SCORING AN EPIC GOAL TO BEAT ALGERIA IN 2010.

You were a great MLS player and you were among the first Americans to play in Europe. But that goal in the World Cup in South Africa is one people still talk about.

Those of us who have been through this and played in World Cups, part of the reason why we get frustrated [with current players] sometimes is we want the players to understand the magnitude of this. We've lived it, and we know what it can do to your life. It literally changed my life and my career forever. So you want to make sure that the players, coaches, staff, everybody understands how valuable and how important this could be.

America's best athletes traditionally pursue other sports. like basketball or the NFL. Might the World Cup wind up offering kids an alternative?

That was me. As a 12-year-old, I liked soccer. I loved playing. I didn't know much about it, other than just going outside and playing with my friends. And in 1994 my eyes were opened for the first time to this greater world that existed. All of a sudden, there was a possibility for me to do something bigger in the sport. There will be kids who are amazing athletes, who are maybe involved in other sports, who now say, "oh, I want to try that." There will definitely be someone like that, if not many.

In your first World Cup, the US made the quarterfinals, its best performance in the modern era. How far can this U.S. team go?

Historically, teams that host the World Cup outperform their capabilities. We've seen it over and over and over again. I know that's anecdotal, but there's also a tangible aspect to that, in that we're one of the seeded teams, right? There's also the intangible of the home-field advantage. The team now, I think, is on a path towards a really, really good chance to succeed. And I wouldn't have said that nine months ago. But I think [manager] Mauricio Pochettino has done a fantastic job. The players are absolutely capable of competing with any team in the world if they are playing at their best. Absolutely, they're capable of winning games like that. So I think they're in a very good way. The minimum is to get through the group and into the round of 32. We should absolutely win a round-of 32-game, and then we'll see from there.

So who's going to be hoisting the Cup when it's all over?

Spain. They're deep, supremely talented, really well coached, and they've adapted with the modern game. They have multiple ways to beat you. They're way more dynamic and athletic with Nico Williams and Lamine Yamal. They're a really good team.

OPPOSITE: TASOS KATOPODIS - FIFA/FIFA VIA GETTY IMAGES; RIGHT: TIMOTHY A. CLARY/AFP VIA GETTY IMAGES

I HOPE THIS HAPPENS TO YOU

BY JAMES BUCKLEY JR.

On July 19, or maybe July 20, depending on the time zone, a national party will break out somewhere in the world. People will pour into the streets of a happy nation's cities, they will fill the air with cheers and fireworks, flags will wave, tears will flow. Whether it's the first time a country has won the World Cup or the sixth, the accomplishment will kick off a celebration unlike any other.

I know . . . I was lucky enough to be at one.

In 1982, I was a college student, traveling around Europe on one of those 12-countries-in-eight-days bus tours, the rare American on the bus actually following the progress of that summer's World Cup (being held in Spain). I did everything I could to watch games. I was in a thrilled crowd to watch Belgium win a group-stage match. In Nice, I watched in a bar with locals as La Belle France fell in the semifinals to West Germany, in what was the World Cup's first-ever penalty-kick shootout. The sorrow in the room was incredible, the emotion deeper than any I had seen after a Super Bowl or World Series loss.

But then I realized where I would be for the championship game: Rome. And West Germany's opponent in the final would be Italy itself. I instantly became a huge fan of Italian football.

Incredibly, on the night of the final, the tour company paid little heed to the big game, setting up a group dinner for us at a pizza restaurant in Rome. The service was, not surprisingly, slow to nonexistent. While most of the students sat around drinking wine and impatiently waiting for pizza, I was in the kitchen watching the game with the staff, who ignored their work to focus on the biggest night of their lives.

After a scoreless first half, there was a frantic halftime distribution of probably not-very-well-prepared pizza. And then it happened: Italy's Paolo Rossi headed in the game's first goal. An eruption of joy! I jumped around with the staff, hugging strangers who didn't care that my Italian was little better than bad high-school Latin. The owner grabbed an Italian flag and ran onto the piazza, screaming and waving the red-white-and-green! A vast noise surrounded the square as it seemed like the whole city shouted or honked at once.

Italy scored two more times, and won, 3-1. The excitement of each goal was multiplied by the thousands after the game. Traffic stopped as the streets filled with joyous people. Wine flowed in every direction. At this point, the terrified students just wanted to get on the bus and bail. Not this paisano. I and a few other brave souls hit the streets to experience this once-in-a-lifetime moment. We waded through mobs, moved with streams of fans, cheering, singing, laughing.

Arriving at Trevi Fountain, we found it filled with people, splashing and celebrating. Being clearly not really Italians, we were spotted by some teenagers brandishing buckets of water. "No Germany!" we shouted. "Viva Italia!" Didn't matter. Rolling my camera into my shirt, I signaled for them to go ahead . . . and we were doused by water from the fountain.

The party went on for hours and hours. We arrived damp and grinning at our hotel, miles away, just as the bus of students finally pulled in. They had missed it all. We lucky few had a story we could tell forever.

As we settle in to watch as many of the 104 games as we can, here's hoping that your favorite team and nation gets to enjoy a similar (and safe) national party (though of course this time, I hope we have it at home in the USA).

VITTORIANO RASTELLI/CORBIS/CORBIS VIA GETTY IMAGES

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